

TRANSCENDENT WASTE

by

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

Transcendent Waste is a collection of stories that explores the difficulties of bereavement through what we literally and metaphorically throw away. Characters in *Transcendent Waste* question the validity of ritual in healing, displace guilt and grief onto relationship and career, and attempt to empathize with others who understand death and mourning in radically different ways.

Influenced by Bataillean notions of excess and Kristeva's concept of the abject, I explore loss by using the concept of "waste" within literal, symbolic, and conceptual frameworks. Waste can signify trash, a surfeit of language, the lost potential of a life, the misuse of time, or the degradation of the body. In "Hotel Grand Abyss," for example, a professor of popular culture/zombie studies reluctantly decides to consign his dementia-riddled father to a convalescent home. Waste need not be negative: in "Strawbellies," for example, waste refers to once-useful survival strategies that must be sloughed off so that a family can recover from the loss of a son. Similarly, in "Mermaid Anatomy," the narrator employs unpunctuated digressions, fractured timelines, and improper syntax; a "wasteful" and energetic language that, by fetishizing the unfamiliar, staves off his depression.

Formally, the stories in "Transcendent Waste" are characterized by disruptions to subject position, language, and linearity. In "Southwest of Guadalajara," a dramatic monologue by the Nazi architect Albert Speer is interrupted by either the collective voice

of his victims or the voice of his own guilt. The story “In The Room / Memory is / White” depicts the relationship of a self-punishing child to his separated parents through multiple points of view and a narrative sequence that moves from the chronological middle towards the first and last scenes. Ideally, the use of unconventional narrative strategies in character-based, pathos-driven plots complicates our understanding both of storytelling and of loss.

For L-

“...one has a tendency to see the world as a vast junkyard, looking at a man and seeing only his (potentially) mangled parts, entering a house only to trace the path of the inevitable fire. Therefore when I was installed here, although I knew an error had been made, I countenanced it, I was shrewd; I was aware that there might well be some kind of advantage to be gained from what seemed a disaster. “

Donald Barthelme, "Me and Miss Mandible"

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- “Glue Factory” first appeared in *Fourteen Hills*
- “Southwest of Guadalajara” first appeared in *Denver Quarterly*
- “Strawbellies” first appeared in *The Tusculum Review*
- “Mermaid Anatomy” first appeared in the *Notre Dame Review*
- “K/S” and “Stomachs of the Homeless” first appeared in *Black Warrior Review*
- “Release” first appeared in *Passages North*
- “Hotel Grand Abyss” first appeared in *Copper Nickel* (Winner, 2010 *Copper Nickel Fiction Contest*)
- “In the Room / Memory is / White” first appeared in *The Normal School* (Winner, 2010 *The Normal School* Normal Prize for fiction)

GOAT PHARMACY

I passed my driving test, and Monkeyfur scored me this job at Gaynor Pharmacy. We worked on alternate days, after wrestling practice, bloated on Gatorade. Monkeyfur, who took fourth at the state championships last year, had Tuesdays and Thursdays. I agreed to do the Wednesday and Saturday shifts, allowing Monkeyfur to attend an optional weekend practice. It wasn't much of a sacrifice. I, wrestling at 160, didn't have the talent to make varsity. Coach said I had to improve my reversals. He had full-body alopecia. If we didn't want to run extra tapeline sprints, we didn't ask to borrow his hairbrush.

Because Monkeyfur kept falling behind on his deliveries (due to having sex in his treehouse with Ginny), Goat had placed both of us on probation. So when I came in on Wednesday, I immediately made sure the back office was clean. Any tiny potatoes mess-up, like an unplugged toilet or a stale peppermint patty, gave Goat a legitimate reason to fire us.

To his credit, Monkeyfur had picked up all the packing peanuts, and had even scrawled a note for me: GBS 8.2. Meaning Goat, nastily hung over, might make me mop out the dumpster – he claimed that wet cardboard cultivated fast-developing, drug-resistant toxic molds. Or, applying his flaccid energies to a week's worth of unsold Jumble Words, he might give me little more than a grunt and a nod.

I turned on the transistor radio. Dead or Alive's "You Spin Me Round (Like A Record)" was on KROQ. What did that mean, to have someone spin you round like a record?

Tearing receipts and prescription instructions off a dot-matrix printer, I found that, luckily, I had only two deliveries: Mrs. Bialetti, and the San Gabriel Valley Elder Care Center, what me and Monkeyfur called the *Corpse Preparation Zone*. With my calligraphic pen (in Japan, you wrote your résumé in calligraphy), I meticulously copied the delivery destinations onto white paper bags, set the amber-colored bottles into the bags, and dropped the bags into a basket I had, on a dare from Monkeyfur, stolen from Gemco.

Goat stood at the counter. Before I tried to pass him, I offered a small prayer to the *kami* that granted ninja invisibility. The prayer was unsuccessful. "Ari," he said to me, using Monkeyfur's real name, "didn't sweep the front yesterday. He knows to sweep."

As always (when Goat was sober), his long silver hair was combed neatly back from his widow's peak. He wore a brown pharmacy smock; his name, Jim Gaynor, stitched in thread over the pocket. The smock barely circled his gut. He must have weighed 280 pounds - I often imagined him stepping onto the four-pound postage scale and the dial going around 70 times. I guessed him into his late sixties; nevertheless he seemed older, ancient and barely bipedal, with this giant capillaried nose, like the Amazon River Delta seen from an airplane.

"I'll sweep later," I told him politely.

“Donny!” he said, charading the motion of brushing dirt into a pan. “You’ll sweep right now.” He looked slightly sad. Ever since we agreed on the school’s right to conduct random locker searches, he seemed hesitant to chastise me. He gave me a ten-cent raise. My maturity, he claimed, let me provide superior customer service to the aged.

I used the broom to whack dust off the front mat, gave the front sidewalk a cursory sweep, and came back in. Michele, the cashier, stopped dusting off bottles of nail polish and hobbled over to me on crutches. Someone had body-slammed her at a thrash show last week and green-sticked her fibula against a fire extinguisher. She wasn’t pretty; teased black hair, zitty, too much turquoise eye shadow. Today she wore blue jeans with spider web embroidery and a bootlegged Mötley Crüe *Theatre of Pain* tour jersey.

“You wannabe new-ro,” she sighed, “slow down on the Sun-in.” My hair, sculpted down into a sharp point between my eyes, glinted an unnatural shade of reddish-blond.

“What’s that scribbling on your skin there?” she added.

“Birthmark.”

“It looks remarkably like ink.”

“Can I go now?” I asked Goat.

“Take a candy bar,” he said with grandfatherly kindness. Michele rolled her eyes. I grabbed a Butterfinger.

Me and Monkeyfur went on deliveries with the Goat Pharmacy truck because Goat was too Scrooge to insure my Toyota or Monkeyfur’s convertible black Rabbit. It was Monkeyfur’s second Rabbit; he had totaled the first one. After he won our league last

year, pinning this dude from San Dimas with a phenomenally fast cradle, his father bought him another, plus subwoofers and tinted windows.

On the way out of the parking lot, the undercarriage of the truck scraped the ground. The rear view mirror showed Goat skulking down the alley to the bar. I put on my right turn signal, as if going to the CPZ. I didn't turn right, though. Instead, I turned left, to Ginny's new house. I couldn't believe she had invited me over. In lit class today, listening to a scratchy recording of *Othello*, she had written her address on my arm. She drew purple daisies to dot her *i*'s. Even now, I could feel the softness of her thumb on my skin. Perhaps we would only watch *The Young and the Restless*, which she recorded every day, but I doubted it.

For once, the air wasn't pink and purple and particulate. It smelled almost salty. At red lights, I checked my molars for stuck bits of that hard orange nougat. "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" came on the radio. The big sky, the lonely desert. Wanting to be alone, and wanting not to be alone.

In the foothills, I passed unfinished tract homes dressed in astronaut-silver sheets of insulation. The front yards gridded out with squares of raw dirt, the roofs covered in curved, salmon-colored adobe tiles, like sign language for waves. Like the neighborhood in *E.T.* I parked behind Ginny's green Karmann Ghia, opened the glove compartment, and pulled out a rubber. I thought about porn stars. Porn star men had hairy chests and I didn't. The women had big boobs, whereas Ginny had pretty much negative boob. Unless they hid under those baggy clothes she wore, sweaters that hung down to her knees.

I took out a second rubber.

The thatched doormat said *Blessings To All*. Did Ginny really want to make out with me? Was this some perverted test orchestrated by Monkeyfur? Like when he convinced me to hide eviscerated trout in the *cold-blooded vertebrates and fishes* section of the school library.

The samurai code (I wanted to attend a senior exchange program to Kyoto next year. I loved Japan, and had been boning up on all things Nipponesque) said you could either be flogged or pilloried for messing around with your best friend's girlfriend. I didn't care. I rang the bell.

*

I met Monkeyfur two years ago, on Yom Kippur. My Mom had run off with some guy who had macho arm hair like Captain Stubing on the *Love Boat*, and my Dad had moved me to this sewage runoff of Los Angeles. Between the fall and spring semesters of ninth grade. I didn't talk to him for months.

The services at the synagogue dragged on. Everyone prayed about hearing but not really hearing, seeing but not really seeing. During the Torah service, Monkeyfur pulled me out of my chair. I didn't argue, and Dad probably figured that I needed a friend a bit more than I needed a God who let 690-year-old people fornicate.

We walked with a few other guys to Dunkin Donuts. I bought a chocolate cruller, Monkeyfur ate a bear claw. The back lot reeked of lard and weed and wet coffee grounds. Monkeyfur procured a purple bong from the inside pocket of his corduroy suit. The bong made a few rounds, with people coughing and me taking half-lungs to not embarrass myself. Monkeyfur said: "Okay: there's a golden goose in a glass box. There's a hole in

the box just big enough for the goose's neck. How do you get the goose out without breaking the box or killing the goose?"

We made up stupid answers. Some guy who had forgotten to take off his *kipah* asked if he could starve the goose.

Monkeyfur said: "The answer is: there, it's out."

"Impossible," I said.

"It's a koan. Either you're a Zen master and you get it or you're not and you don't."

In my hazy state, I made myself remember to look up Zen in the dictionary.

We stumbled back to the synagogue. One of the adults said: "Ari, you smell like smoke."

Ari said: "Must be the new guy."

The man laughed. I laughed. Monkeyfur liked me enough to incriminate me.

*

Ginny was gorgeous. Her white strapless top went great against her skin.

"You've got birds?" I asked.

She closed the front door behind me. "Parakeets. Twiggy and Eyelash."

"Is anyone home?"

"What do you think?"

Awkwardly I leaned forward and kissed her. Her lips were soft and chapped at the same time. She tasted like wintergreen. "Don't be all crazy," she said, taking my finger in her mouth. I had never felt anything remotely like it.

She led me up the stairs, which felt sticky with gravitational pull. The background in her family photos didn't look like America. Wetback, she once told me, meant anyone who sacrificed everything for a better life.

"Sorry," she said, "my room's kind of messy."

A crucifix was nailed directly on top of the door's peephole.

"It doesn't look messy," I said.

Her room looked nothing like my room. Above my bed hung an original poster of *Mothra vs. Godzilla*; inelegant, Japanese nonetheless. She had tacked to her wall a collage of her favorite bands: Oingo Boingo, Devo, and The Germs, though The Germs were punk. On her dresser lay a mirrored platform with perfumes in fancy shapes. Yellow and green tassels (our school colors) on the brass bedposts. And teddy bears covered the bed, which disturbed me far more than the photo of her and Monkeyfur from this year's Sadie Hawkins Dance.

Ginny closed the shutters. We kissed some more, bouncing a little bit on the bed's white comforter. She pulled off my collared shirt, slid her hand under my jeans, her nails running lightly through my pubes. My skin there jumped. I tried to distract myself by measuring out the size of her room in *tatami* mats. 6 ½ or 7, I thought.

Still, no amount of thinking about other stuff helped. She licked the outside of my ear, the inside. In the warmth of her tongue, I heard the echo of a conch shell. I felt my muscles tighten around my tailbone, and I came.

This mortified me. So she couldn't tell, I rolled her over. A bear fell off the bed. I pinched her nipples. "Intense," she said. I lifted up her shirt. The arc of her protruding

ribs, the sharp crease of her hips, the starburst of raised scars above her belly button. The scars were old; she had sworn to both me and Monkeyfur that she had stopped cutting.

She put her top back down, slid off her bright purple leggings, and placed my hand on her underwear. “Go there,” she said.

First, I licked her over her underwear. “Panties,” she said. I tugged them down to her knees. I’d never seen a girl’s parts up close. She had dark pubic hair, and two flaps of almost swollen skin. To my surprise, I liked the taste, which was indescribable, like *umami*. I couldn’t detect a relationship between my tongue and her breathing, and I didn’t care. She seemed happy, which made me happy. Every once in a while, I removed the point of my wet Flock of Seagulls hair from my mouth.

“Jesus,” she said. Her stomach shuddered. I looked up to see her head haloed by bears. Had she given each one a name, like Princess or Silky?

I felt myself hard again; I had, I realized, been grinding my crotch into the mattress. “I’m going to get a rubber,” I said.

“If you want.”

My hands shook and I couldn’t rip open the wrapper and at first I put on the condom upside-down. I no longer recognized my dick. It was some kind of external attachment, like the crevice tool for a vacuum cleaner.

This is the end of virginity, I thought.

I opened Ginny’s closet door.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

Seeing nothing of interest, I closed it. Trying to move in an erotic way, trying not to crush her under my weight, I climbed on top of her. I pretended that I was doing some

kama sutra thing, sliding myself around her outside skin. The principle, I assumed, worked something like magnets, or suction.

In any case, until I saw her face wrinkle up, it felt incredible.

“Off!” she said. As if giving a command to a humping dog.

“What’s wrong?”

We lay there, side by side, on our backs, only our arms touching. Ginny seemed angry and far away, beyond words. Then she bit my neck.

“What the fuck?”

“You’re going to be one of those boys,” she sneered, “that you have to guide in.”

She went to the bathroom. I heard her lock the push-button as well as the bolt. It worried me that she turned on the faucet full-bore, that she was using noise to cover her cutting again.

I waited for her to calm down. After a few minutes, I figured out that she had, in fact, turned on the bathtub. She wasn’t coming out until I left. Forlornly I put on my clothes. My neck throbbed. The birds wouldn’t stop chirping. As revenge, I thought about hanging the condom in their cage, but I knew how guilty I would feel if one of them choked. And if her parents found the condom, they would blame Monkeyfur; I would feel guilty for that too.

I slammed the front door, for no reason other than to let Ginny know I had gone.

*

When I was eleven, the teacher of my Hebrew class planned an after-school field trip to the Tarzana Convalescent Home. I convinced Mom, who signed the consent form, to give me extra allowance for the post-trip Israeli dinner at Sabra.

I, however, had no intention of going. With the exception of my very sprightly grandma (my other three grandparents had died before I was born), I had a total horror of old people.

My grandma wore a tan leotard everywhere. She did jazzercise in a portable geodesic dome in the back yard of her ramshackle house. Circular saw blades were nailed onto the property fence.

Besides, I couldn't stand the lies my teacher told us about our *mitzvah*. A choir of pubescent kids with cracking voices, singing songs in a language we could barely pronounce, to people who could barely hear; what kind of good deed was that?

That afternoon, I rode my Schwinn cruiser home, changed into my baseball uniform: white stirrup pants, orange jersey with tiny air holes. Because practice was in Studio City, and arranging a carpool would have alerted Mom, I took the public bus down Ventura, sitting nervously between two maids who carried their cleaning supplies in plastic buckets.

My coach didn't like my strike zone; I kept swinging at bad pitches.

That night, Mom found the consent form in the back pocket of my school pants.

"Mrs. Sodokoff didn't ask for it," I said.

"Mrs. Sodokoff is absent-minded. What songs did you sing?"

"Bashana Haba'ah," I lied. Mom knew, didn't push. I hid my soiled stirrups under my mattress. After the next game, I buried them at the bottom of the laundry hamper.

*

It was abnormal. Mrs. Bialetti stood there in her front yard, shivering, underdressed. Usually I had to ring three times before she croaked through the intercom,

“No more life insurance!” Only when I gave her the secret code – Diclofenac, the name of her arthritis medication - did she let me in.

I parked the truck, leaned over to the passenger seat for her medications; the emergency brake jabbed into my stomach, which felt wrung tight, like a towel at a car wash. My neck still ached. And I wanted to remove the rubber as soon as possible.

Walking up to Mrs. Bialetti, I saw that her knees bowed inwards, as if she had to pee. She wore a sky-blue shirt and white polyester pants that in grade school we called floods; clothing for the pitch and putt.

“I locked myself up,” she said.

I groaned. The saurian eyelids and pinhole memories and unthrottled leakages of old people repulsed me. Her blue-green veins stuck out, as if filled with formaldehyde. They reminded me of a science experiment, which reminded me of Mr. Sneek, the body-building chemistry teacher who wore a He-Man doll around his neck. Once, during detention, he made me and Ginny and Monkeyfur watch *Pumping Iron*, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger bragged about how he would rather lift weights than shoot his wad.

“Don’t you have an extra key?” I asked. “What about under the welcome mat?”

“You can tunnel in through the doggie door.”

Briefly I considered leaving her out to freeze; a Mrs. Bialetti ice mummy.

“Sure,” I said. In the end, I didn’t despise her. She told me cool war stories about her dead husband, one of the original Flying Tigers, the first ace to paint a shark on his fighter plane.

Having a wrestler’s body, thick-kneed and broad-shouldered, it took some time to sausage myself through the doggy door. The door’s metal frame caught on my belt. I

couldn't wiggle back out, and I had never asked Mrs. Bialetti if she owned a dog. I didn't hear any growling. What if she had a Doberman with no vocal chords?

Cautiously I crawled into the kitchen. On a dusty rosewood end table, a pyramid of pears, mottled brown and concave with rot, sat in a fruit dish. Next to the dish were Mrs. Bialetti's keys. A crinkly handwritten sign wedged into the molding of a pane of stained glass said: *Mom, have you remembered your keys?*

As silver lining, I had an opportunity to take off the condom. It looked pathetic on me, like a talc-colored sea cucumber. I threw it in the trash, covered it with a paper towel, and opened the front door.

"You're my sweet bean," she said. Slowly she raised her arms; she wanted to give me a hug. I was sure I would retch if she touched me. Like on my 15th birthday party, when I got food poisoning from the hibachi shrimp at Benihana.

How bad would it be to give her a hug? Would it be a *mitzvah*? At least Mrs. Bialetti wore clothes. Her parts were the same as any other woman's, even the same as Ginny's, only more dilapidated.

I snatched the money from her hand and left.

As I got into my car, I saw Mrs. Bialetti following me down the walk, one leg dragging behind her; most likely she was getting the mail. I drove away, feeling stupid and ashamed. How infantile, so easily nauseated by the elderly, their drool stains and shit smears. Maybe that explained why Ginny rejected me. Monkeyfur was agile and unafraid and rock-hard and he claimed it was far more challenging to get an F+ than to get an A. I hid behind the couch each time *The Wizard of Oz* came on.

*

About a year ago, before Ginny and I got to know each other, we were named Sophomores of the Month. I didn't do anything special, other than washing the most cars at a fundraiser for Muscular Dystrophy. Monkeyfur stayed home that morning, mimosa in hand, playing shuffleboard by the pool with a stack of stuck-together frozen pancakes.

The school honored us at an Elks Club breakfast held in a bowling alley. I ate crispy bacon and scrambled eggs drowned in grape jelly. Ginny sat on the other side of her Dad, Mr. Menendez, who also happened to be the Dean of Boys. She responded to his questions with curt, resentful nods.

Mr. Menendez presented us with our awards: two free frames each (shoe rental inclusive) and a 25-dollar gift certificate to Tower Records. Ginny's gigantic round eyes seemed to absorb all the light in the room. She chewed on a Chiclet; I loved the sound she made spitting it into the trash. Always she wore mint-green fingernail polish. Everything about her was minty.

The next semester, Monkeyfur and Ginny and I shared a table in Mr. Sneek's class. We concocted our own fire extinguishing fluid and cheated on multiple-choice tests by patterns of winking and blinking. For lunch at Ginny's old house, we deliberately overcooked our microwave burritos, exploding wet beans and liquid cheese against the glass.

One night, at a school basketball game (our beloved Huskies down eighteen by the half), the three of us snuck under the bleachers, inebriating ourselves on Crystal Light and vodka. With Ginny cheering us on, me and Monkeyfur wrestled *sumo* until he gave me a wedgie and I bashed my arm on a piece of metal scaffolding. Vaguely I remembered that I forgotten my trig book; I stumbled to my locker. On my way back,

behind the gym, I saw them making out, Ginny's thin body cushioned against an unused blocking dummy.

"That's sick!" I yelled to Ginny. "His whole body's a toupée!"

(As early as 8th grade, Monkeyfur had a mega-hairy back. Someone decided to call him a Sasquatch. Then someone else called him a hairball. A third person noted that hairballs were duh, internal. Sasquatch -> Hairball -> Furball -> Monkeyfur.)

Monkeyfur wiggled his tongue at me à la Gene Simmons.

"You're wasted," Ginny said. "Go home."

Because Monkeyfur's Dad was in Haiti, attending a conference about the curative properties of voodoo poison on the coronary system, Monkeyfur had the house to himself. I tailgated him and Ginny all the way there. Flashing my brights, screeching around the curves. Me honking and honking, the neighbors coming out bleary and upset. Monkeyfur waving sarcastically goodnight. The garage door sliding down.

*

Assuming that Goat wasn't already blitzed, and therefore indifferent to the general principle of time, I could make my delivery to the CPZ and get back to the pharmacy without arousing his suspicion. The only problem was my hands, which kept a completely skeletal grip on the steering wheel. Whether from the near-miss of Mrs. Bialetti's embrace or from Ginny's feral disgust, I couldn't yet face Goat and Michele.

Taco Freddy was me and Monkeyfur's regular post-delivery meal and second favorite hangout, after the In-N-Out off Arrow Highway. Across the street, you could rent industrial vehicles – caterpillars and cherry pickers and earthmovers. Next door stood an

open-air market where a fake ID could score a case of Meisterbrau. Or, if you were Monkeyfur, something more expensive, like Corona.

Or, if you were Monkeyfur, you would actually be, at this moment, at Taco Freddy, playing Ms. Pacman.

Could he know already? Not unless Ginny told him, which seemed unlikely.

It was too late to turn around. I took a deep, deep breath and walked in, ordered *sesos* and a *horchata*, pulled a fifty-dollar bill from my pocket. This made me laugh; Mrs. Bialetti had been following me to my car so she could ask for her change.

I approached Monkeyfur. Despite my anxiousness, I couldn't help but admire his mastery of the Ms. Pacman machine. He didn't simply toggle the joystick. He used his head and hips, as if only the perfectly fluid, coordinated movement of his entire body allowed him to seduce Blinky and Pinky into misdirection and collision and temporary extinction.

He said excitedly: "I figured out the fly, the fly."

"You saw me in the reflection of the screen," I replied.

"Brilliant, Einstein."

Einstein wasn't my last name. It was a contraction for *fucking Einstein*.

"Painted on the urinals, urinals." According to Monkeyfur, it was *Official Linguistic Disturbance Week*. He was echolalic. "You know how they're always painted up and to the left of the drain? It's so you don't spatter yourself, spatter yourself."

There was always a pause after Monkeyfur spoke. Usually I felt like a cheetah keeping up with him. Cheetahs could run amazingly fast, but only for a short time, or else their brains overheated and they died.

“What are you up to?” I asked nonchalantly. I kept my hands in my pockets; my fingers must have held Ginny’s smell.

“Waiting for you.”

To clamp down on my terror, I imagined a Zen monk in a flowing black robe who, wanting me to recover my rapidly deteriorating calm, rapped me on the wrist with a bamboo switch.

“Exactly why are you waiting for me?” I said.

“Business proposition.”

The fact that he didn’t know didn’t stop me from needing a minute to recompose myself. “Hang on,” I said, “I have to piss.”

“Don’t forget to check out the fly.” His Ms. Pacman gobbled a banana. “And will you fetch my girlfriend? She’s been in there forever.”

“Are you kidding? I’m not going into the girls’ bathroom.”

The hallway to the bathroom was lined with posters for Negro Modelo Beer. Mexican women with bleach blonde hair, cleavaged black one-pieces. Sure enough, there was a fly in the urinal, though Monkeyfur neglected to mention that the fly had gotten itself caught in a spider web.

I let the lavender soap froth up in my palm. The walls between the bathrooms were as thin as a *shoji* screen, which allowed me to hear someone barfing.

What did Ginny just puke up? The very event of us?

With scalding water, I washed my face and hands. I scrubbed the skin around Ginny’s address until it faded to a sunburn pink. Before the purple daisies disappeared, they turned into pinwheels and peacock’s tails.

After I heard Ginny leave the bathroom, I counted out another minute.

In the tacqueria, a television mounted above an empty fish tank showed an image of a Texaco station. Ginny leaned on the Ms. Pacman machine, her hand in Monkeyfur's back pocket. It pissed me off. Though she had made herself up, she seemed drained, desiccated. Long, gaunt face with long eyelashes, and too much white powder on her face, as if covering up wrinkles from the future.

My food sat under a heat lamp. I put *pico de gallo* and marinated carrots into little plastic cups, found a seat far from Ms. Pacman, ate as fast as I could. The *sesos*, normally mushy and salty, had no taste. Each time Monkeyfur completed another level, Ginny french-kissed him.

"No tongue in public," I called. Why couldn't I shut up?

Ginny replied, "The only way you can get any tongue is if you order *lengua*."

"What were you doing in the bathroom?" I asked. "Expelling your imaginary bitch?"

"Don't call me a bitch, bitch." I could tell from her tight jaw that her tongue was flattening her gum against the roof of her mouth.

Monkeyfur didn't seem to sense anything unusual about the acidity of our banter. "I lost my guy," he lamented, "lost my guy."

They sat down across from me. Monkeyfur caught me gazing at the writing on the restaurant window - *sabado y domingo MENUDO!!!* – and asked: "Why would a boy band would name themselves after a soup? It's an insult to pig intestines."

I swigged down the chalky *horchata*.

"On to business," he said.

“Bad time,” I said, my mouth half-full.

“As my wingman, I wanted to clue you in to my genius before we arrived at the pharmacy.”

I couldn’t deal. Abruptly I stood up. “Let’s do whatever we’re about to do some other day.”

“According to Michele, Goat’s beyond plastered,” said Monkeyfur. “Therefore today’s a perfect day.”

“Believe me, it’s a terrible day. Don’t come by.” I walked out.

*

At my job interview, Goat pointed out wraparound sunglasses and depimpling ointments and those ring-binder paper reinforcements that tasted like paste when you licked them. He took me out front, where he deliberately dropped a penny. “Some kid’s lucky day,” he said. He threw another penny further down the sidewalk. “Generosity allows humans to live with themselves,” he added. “And you need a healthy dose of generosity to work in this pharmacy.”

“I like to help people,” I replied. Goat nodded: the lame answer was the right answer. So what if my future boss was not only an alcoholic, as Monkeyfur had noted, but a walking fortune cookie? I imagined myself in Kyoto, writing *kanji*, learning the quiet, elegant art of bonsai, wearing an indigo kimono enlivened by a white-winged crane. Dad had called it prissy and refused to bankroll the student fee.

Soon I made my first visit to the CPZ. A malarial buzz spewed down from the fluorescent lights. It smelled stale and brown, like a petrified fart. In the hall sat a woman

in a wheelchair. She was smoking; her hand trembled. An oxygen tube ran under her nose. The hem of her nightdress was soaked. Urine dripped onto the floor.

She rolled her wheelchair back and forth, blocking my path. I remembered how Goat told me to look everyone in the eye. Each person, regardless of physical or mental circumstance, had a fundamentally human need to be recognized by others. I remembered my vow to fight my abhorrence for old people, to treat every day as *keiro no hi*, or Respect for the Aged Day.

But the woman kept saying, “Hold me, young man, hold me.”

I pushed her wheelchair against the wall and scurried by, thinking: *there are degrees of human*.

That evening, I complained to Dad. “Suck it up,” he said. “When you get old, you won’t want some three-balled teenager treating you like dirt.”

I didn’t plan on getting old, I told Dad.

I called Monkeyfur. “They’re freaks,” I said. “I can’t handle it.”

“Get yourself baked, that’s what I do.”

“If you’re stoned, how can you outrun them?”

“Come on,” he said. “Do me this one favor.” He needed me to timeshare with him. Paradoxically, his Dad would cut off his allowance if he didn’t maintain regular employment. Plus how degrading, to work in a Mickey D’s or Baskin Robbins; your scooper arm went mutant huge.

I kept the job.

*

What couldn’t wait until Monkeyfur’s next shift, and why did he need my help?

I had no doubt that Monkeyfur and Ginny would be waiting for me at the pharmacy. Regardless, I had bought myself some time. Maybe in fifteen minutes I might seem slightly less like an impotent, unfuckworthy retard.

Probably Monkeyfur and Michele were skimming the register. It would be smart to do it during my shift; Goat would never suspect me.

At a crosswalk two blocks before the CPZ, I had to slam on my brakes for a woman with a stroller. I honked at her. Good chance there wasn't even a baby in there. More likely, it was a ferret, or a bag of potting soil.

I made the delivery, recklessly throwing the medications into a sink at the untended front desk (another dismissable offense), and drove back into the pharmacy lot. Against a parking stump stood a shopping cart. A bunch of wilted scallions hung limply over the child seat. Ginny stood by the pharmacy's back door, nervously smoking her menthols, two fingers callipered around the tendon of her elbow.

"Why are you even with him right now?" I asked.

"He called me. That's what boyfriends do, right? How could I say no?"

"You could act a bit more normal."

"I'm trying," she pleaded. "It's hard to fake everything being normal."

"Being fake seems easy for you," I said, flicking the cigarette out of her hand.

"Asshole," she said.

I went inside. Goat sat fatly on his stool, passed out, snoring. His arms splayed onto the counter. He must have been crushing his bulbous nose; no wonder he had sleep apnea.

Michele and Monkeyfur weren't stealing money from the register. What then? I heard them in the back office. To get by Goat, I turned myself sideways, sucked in my stomach. He smelled like hour-old puke and cheap whiskey – the kind used in Western movies to cauterize bullet wounds. Me and Monkeyfur would have to expand the GBS, or Goat Bender Scale, to cover this level of obliteration. This was at least a 12.

I saw Monkeyfur's hand digging into a jar of Ritalin. "You're doing drugs?" I asked.

"For teenagers," said Monkeyfur, "Ritalin is a gold mine. Grade-A speed."

"You've been letting Goat teach you about pharmaceuticals," I asked Michele, "to know what to sell?"

"It wasn't so he could get a woodie checking out my ass when I go up on the ladder."

When I got old, would some teenage girl show me her cleavage out of pity? Did Ginny pity me? To be pitied at sixteen, by a sixteen-year-old: what could be worse?

"Don't look all shocked," Michele said.

Goat let out a groan, settled back into his stupor. We didn't move. "Ask," the new Smiths single, played softly on the radio. Compared to anything on *The Queen is Dead*, it was weak.

The precise, thoughtful way Monkeyfur counted and divided the Ritalin made me think of Japanese gift-wrapping (*tsutsumi*), as if he would place each plastic baggie inside a balsa-wood box, covered in marbled paper or hand-dyed cloth, without wrinkle or visible Scotch tape.

“All you have to do is adjust the inventory records,” he said. “For that, we’ll give you – what did we say, Michele? Ten percent.”

“About two hundred dollars a month.”

“You’re going to get caught,” I said.

“We’re not going to get caught,” Monkeyfur said dismissively, “get caught.”

“Can you shut up with that repeating shit?” asked Michele.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Then you’re going to ruin Goat’s business,” I said.

“It’s not my problem,” said Monkeyfur, “if he diverts his profits to his liver.”

“You call him Goat too,” said Michele. “Why go to bat for him now?”

I felt sorry for Goat, the way he made himself grimy and septic, the way he complained about the carapaces of crickets clogging up his storm drains, the way he bemoaned the fact that not one of his three children stayed on the west coast to help him ease into retirement.

“Pathetic and subhuman aren’t the same thing,” I said.

A sound like an uncoiled spring came from Goat’s stool. Somehow he had managed to verticalize himself, his body canted against the doorframe. Noticing Monkeyfur’s hands full of pills, he slurred, “Stealers deserve to be incardinated.”

Astonished, we watched him fumble for his keys, start lurching towards the front door.

“Fuck a duck,” said Monkeyfur.

“Stay frosty,” said Michele. “If he tries to fire us, we can have his license revoked. Monkeyfur, put back the drugs.”

Michele hopped crutchlessly over to Goat. Softly she tried to talk him down. Monkeyfur emptied the pills back into their container. “Now that you’ve had time to consider,” he asked me, “are you with us?”

I wanted to cut off his fingers.

Pretending to appreciate Goat’s cabinet of oddities, the old-time pharmacist’s rusty cylindrical weights and tin scales, I said: “Goat’s trying to get us arrested, and you don’t see any potential problems going ahead with everything?”

“I’m betting the bank on memory loss due to alcohol poisoning.”

“You are so arrogant!” I could see him as a forty-year-old, a monogrammed North Hills High School class ring with an imitation emerald on his hairy knuckle. He would be a spectacular, transcendent waste, like that dead, 95,000 pound sperm whale that spontaneously exploded on an Oregon beach the year I was born, but still a waste.

“It’s a lot of *unagi*, Mr. Miyagi.”

“Screw your vision quest for the elusive F+,” I said.

“Which means exactly what?”

At that moment, we heard a crashing of sticks in the hall near the back door, followed by a massive whump! As if someone punched a pillow. Michele shrieked. The seeing-eye sensor went off. And again, and again.

Goat was lying face-down on the linoleum. He must have tottered forward and tried to steady himself on the wicker basket full of rubber-tipped canes. The basket fell too, and the canes looked like giant spaghetti halfway out of the box.

Ginny hovered over him, one hand tugging at a crucifix earring I hadn’t noticed before. She seemed concerned, though relatively unphased. I, on the other hand, started to

see amoeba-like spots in front of my eyes, and I was sweating profusely. Previously, I had only seen unconscious people on *Emergency 51*. The blood on Goat's forehead and on the metal casing of the motion detector looked thicker, more opaque.

"Righteous!" yelled Monkeyfur. He held a cane over Goat's head, as if brandishing a spear. "Great caveman slay mastodon, mastodon!"

"Don't be a dick!" I said weakly.

"Just kidding."

"Besides," said Michele, "people remember shit."

"From the way his eyelids are fluttering," said Ginny, who got 106% on her final Anatomy & Physiology test (answering extra credit on the Islets of Langerhans), "he's got a concussion."

Monkeyfur pointed the cane at my neck: "Dude, is that a hickie? Who'd you bang?"

That shook off my wooziness. "It's not a hickie," I declared, putting up my shirt collar. I made an effort not to look at Ginny. "Shouldn't we call the paramedics?"

"Help me roll this big boy over," said Michele, "before he suffocates."

We turned Goat onto his back. His breathing was regular. Michele pressed a Kleenex against the gash. "He'll survive," she said. "A couple of stitches are definitely in the cards." As she did any time the GBS hit seven, Michele went to call Mrs. Goat, who would arrive twenty minutes later in an Econoline van airbrushed with Florida's Okefenokee swamp. Sometimes she had to lower the wheelchair ramp to get Goat in.

"We should jam," Monkeyfur told Ginny.

He was right, as usual. If Goat regained consciousness and saw Monkeyfur, he'd remember everything.

But if Monkeyfur left, he would, for the billionth time, prove himself immune to consequences. I yelled: "You wanted to know about the hickie? Your girlfriend gave it to me."

"Sure she did." He sounded a little confused.

"I don't want to burst your bubble, but I did fuck her."

Ginny gave him a *no way in hell did I or would I do that* scowl.

"It's cool," he said to me. He had regained his confidence. "I get it. You're pissed about the drug scam, and about me being unkind to Goat."

It was a strange moment, like in a boxing video game where the soon-to-be-loser wobbled and wobbled, waiting to be knocked out by the victor's last brutal uppercut. All I had to do was insist once more on me and Ginny. Which I didn't do. Stuck in my head was this photo from the Kyoto program brochure: tens of people cleaning the subway stairs. With toothbrushes. It was an end-of-year purification ritual, a way of dividing the past from the future.

I looked at Monkeyfur, his permanently smug dimples and false, wide eyed contrition, and I concluded that this line between old and new didn't exist. I didn't want to totally clean the slate; I didn't want to totally destroy what the three of us shared.

"You're right," I said. "I was just yanking your chain. I'm sorry."

"No problem, compadre."

They started to walk out; I had gotten away with it. In a way, we had all gotten away with it. Until they reached the door, where Ginny started to sob and her hands and her gaunt cheeks trembled and Monkeyfur knew.

“Really?” he asked her.

She kept sadly, guiltily shaking her head.

Monkeyfur put his thumb and forefinger to his bushy brows. “It’s true,” he said, “you really fucked her.”

I nodded. It was too late to deny anything.

He ran up to me and hurled me against the wall. His forearm pushed thick under my jaw, crushing my Adam’s Apple. A minute ago, I was apologizing. Now the sudden, unexpected velocity of this pain made me spiteful, aggressive, and I managed to gasp out, “Fucked her.” Mocking him.

Monkeyfur released me. My knees were jellied; I slumped down. He smacked a cane against the wall above my head. A white dust of drywall showered down on me. He grabbed Ginny’s arm and half-dragged her out of the pharmacy.

“We didn’t fuck,” she cried. “Why did you say that?”

I sat on the floor, alternately coughing and gasping, until I heard Monkeyfur’s Rabbit drive off. I stood up, got band-aids and hydrogen peroxide and cotton balls off the pharmacy shelves, and knelt beside Goat, who was snoring.

Michele came out from the office. “Impressive work,” she said.

“I guess,” I said. “Tell Goat I quit.”

While Michele daubed a few spots of blood from one ear, I unstuck the Kleenex from Goat's wound, applied peroxide to his forehead. It must have stung; he didn't flinch.

"None of the band-aids are big enough," I told Michele. She shrugged.

I sort of hoped that Ginny waited for me outside; the biggest part of me felt relief that she had, in fact, gone with Monkeyfur. I screeched through the curves on Covina Valley Road. "Cities in Dust" came on; I cranked the volume. The video always made me nostalgic, the bubbling lava that flowed under Siouxsie's thigh-slit dress. Monkeyfur told me that it was about Pompeii – something about a *blanket of cinders*. Men preserved in antiquity by ash.

For dinner, I would make Ginny's specialty: corn tortillas topped with butter and sugar. She said the recipe came from El Salvador. And though I had almost finished my history essay on *Bushido* conceptions of honor, I decided to change my topic, to how the samurai integrated Confucianism into their codes. Dad would be so condescendingly pleased. I could see him cleaning out one thumbnail with the other thumbnail, calling me cocky for writing my assignments in pen. Most of your bright ideas, he often told me, would need to be erased.

SECOND CITY

Magnificence: the smell of hyacinth, the street below sparkling emerald and saffron.

Mom lies on the hotel bed, in her terrycloth bathrobe, fanning herself and reading scripture. *She's wrecked from the heat*, your father says. *Let's you and me take a boat ride*. He has orchestrated this Bangkok vacation, in what he calls **our second city of angels**. Generally you shy away from him, and your mother would enjoy the floating market, but she says *go ahead, he wants words with you*. Your father forces his Dodgers cap over his silvering hair, and soon you're racing along in a taxi with broken seat belts. He clears his throat. *I've always been faithful to your mother*, he says. You feel queasy, as if having sucked in tuk-tuk exhaust. Please don't let him confess some ancient affair. He drapes his arm over your shoulder and adds: *probably more faithful than to you*. You slump down, turn to the window, imagining mermaids in purple silk who glide below the boats full of mangosteens. His regret is pathetic, weak-minded, far more nauseating than his potential indiscretions. *I've been doing math*, he says. *Eight hours of sleep per day, twelve hours of work, that leaves four hours to divide up among everything else. So how many of those hours does a child deserve from his father?* You reply: *one more than a **child** gets*. Your father retracts his arm. The drone of the air-con crowds out the space between you.

*

The taxi stops at the dock. Your father hands a bill to the driver and the driver frowns. *No change*, he says. Your father elbows you, as if to say: pay attention. *No change?* he asks the driver. *Really?* The driver empties out his pockets, shows you that his wallet contains only the paper strips from fortune cookies. Your father snatches back the money. *Find some change*, he says, *or you don't get zip*. The driver puts his hand next to the electric door lock. *You pay me now*, he says. Though he's barely eighteen, with a boy's thin moustache, he tries to stare down your father. Maybe there's a lead pipe under the seat. Your father actually looks like he would enjoy a fight. It embarrasses you, the fat crooked vein that pulses on his temple. Luckily, they don't come to blows. The driver reaches into the glove box. Smiling, as if genuinely surprised, he says, *Look here! I found some change! I thought you might*, says your father. He takes the change and stuffs the bill in the ash tray. *That's how you handle them*, your father says to you. He flings open the taxi door. But as he stands up, he hits his head on the doorframe. *Jesus!* He staggers down the pier, past all the canoes splayed with little river octopus. Instinctively you grab his arm. *Don't try to wheelchair me!* He has no idea how he got here. His panic terrifies you, disgusts you. If only you could let him drift down the river. In this city of muffler fumes and burnt sugar, at the floating market, your father is, for the first time, old.

GLUE FACTORY

Matthias has found many ways to kill you. As a Siberian tiger, he left maul-scratches on your shoulders. He fed you heart-shaped, poison-laced waffles with Katrina's rubber-coated spoon, cackled triumphant at your gagging and choking, the pink imprints on your clutched throat. You erected a Lego skyscraper and he forced you face down on the carpet, your cheeks pricked by graham cracker crumbs, his knees digging deep into your spine. "*Drei, zwei, eins!*" The building demolished by his roundhouse, blue and yellow rubble strewn over your corpse.

In gallops your goddaughter Katrina, humming Papageno's theme from *Die Zauberflöte*, straddling the most gorgeous hobbyhorse ever seen. Charcoal-black face, red yarn mane, hand-stuffed and stitched by her mother Ulrike for her second birthday.

"Don't breathe!" hisses Matthias. He tugs at your t-shirt, a frayed v-neck with a stick figure sledge-hammering a television set. Apparently he's trying to puncture your carotid. It's crossing the line, his teeth on your tendons. Push up onto all fours. He hangs on like a baby monkey. Katrina clomps-clomps herself into your vision. She circles her finger around the horse's plastic eye, the jiggling iris, delightfully unfazed by the worm of snot down her nostril.

"Giddy up!" Matt interprets your brackish shrug as the defiance of a bucking bronco, not as a signal for him to get off. On second thought, don't dissuade him. Cultivating exhaustion might allow for scattered sleep over Iceland this evening en route

home to San Francisco. Or at least a less anxious meditation concerning the impending reconstruction of your old life.

As if on a racetrack, avoiding rag dolls and foil swords, haul Matthias around the oval rug. Katrina follows you. Giddily. The jagged sound of your jeans splitting at the knee. The blue tendrils of the wispy denim, and the exposed, purpler filament of a scar. Earned fifteen years ago during a Gulf War protest, retreating from tear gas and tripping half-blind over a sewer grate and onto a spill of shattered plate glass. Matthias whips you by slapping your back. Whinny for him. Keep crawling around the room.

In the kitchen, Tomas is chopping carrots for your picnic – a special going-away celebration of your annual trip to Berlin. This being the seventh year, and almost fifteen since you met him in Rome, at a Mussolini-era youth hostel which he described as *tyrannically columnar*, trying to protect a young Kiwi woman from her abusive con-man boyfriend.

Already Tomas has baked the homemade pizza, diluted two parts organic apple juice to one part water. How can he listen to Iggy Pop on that tinny, small-speakered boom-box? Criminal. Iggy's still sexy, his sweat-glistened clavicle and extruded ribs, despite the whiff of sell-out – last month's Rolling Stone article charting his journey from proto-punk to oenophilia. The photograph of him, bare-chested, sipping a Bordeaux in a thin-lipped Riedel glass, whatever a Riedel glass does for wine.

Collapse onto the rug. "I'm kaput."

"*Für dich*," Matt announces, "glue factory!" On his tumbled dismount, he crashes into Katrina, who starts to cry.

Pick her up, wipe off her tears as if removing evidence. “We talked about gentle,” you say to Matt, “didn’t we?”

“We did not!”

It pisses you off, his fusion of innocence and violence, his unfamiliarity with the borders of his strength. Ulrike comes in, holding a rolled-up draft of her dissertation abstract. Due in the department office three days ago. The strings of her olive hoodie hang at uneven heights. Set Katrina down. Matt sends a symbolic kick in her direction, wraps himself around his mother’s leg.

“You’ve made a mess of our bedroom,” says Ulrike. A British overtone to her accent, picked up from *Tops of the Pops* illegally smuggled into East Germany. She rubs her sacrum. She and Tomas have been sleeping in the kids’ room, on a leaky air mattress that lowers them to the laminate floor by sunrise.

“See? Within ten minutes everyone’s in tears.”

The self-pity in your voice accentuates its whiny ornamentations. “Really, Ben, unless you bubble-wrap them, it can’t be helped.” There’s something hard about the shape of her smile. She takes the kids to get dressed.

Shove your skull-covered boxers and your other pair of jeans into a canvas rucksack. On it, secured by safety pins, a cloth patch with a silkscreen of Abbie Hoffman.

Matt’s broken balsa wood sailboat is hiding behind the bed. Last night, drunk on Hefeweizen, after you had gone onto the planter-filled balcony and thrown all the sliced lemons at placards on the adjacent building (the placards, you learned, an art installation entitled *Missing House*), you realized that only liters of water would save you from a hangover that would swell your tongue. Stumbling to the bathroom, the mouth of an

empty beer bottle stuck on your ring finger, you flattened the boat. Accidentally. For thirty minutes, you tried to recast its original shape.irate that balsa was fragile and irreparable by flummoxed hands, everything that backlit your adoration of Rebecca finally abandoned you. The rigid subset of memory to which you had clung - the villages of coastal Spain, sardine-eating, dark waves with blisteringly white crests – gone. “I hope she doesn’t get a refund on her plane ticket,” you slurred. “She’ll try. Oh, she’ll try. She’ll traipse into the travel agency and flip her *Salon Selected* hair.” Tomas and Ulrike nodded. They had never met her, were supposed to meet her this week.

Set the green-sticked boat someplace where Matt will eventually find it. There, under the helicopter pad of a Lego offshore oil rig. The plate of half-eaten cyanide waffles sits atop your pillow. Bring it over to the sink. “You can wash it,” says Tomas. He’s slicing up the pizza with a spur-cutter. Always you’ve admired his broad shoulders, the erudite silver hairs that pepper his chiseled sideburns. The scalding water makes your pulverized thumbnail feel as if dipped in acid. Twelve days since you crushed it against a file cabinet, at 3AM, piling your possessions in a friend’s garage, atop banana boxes filled with pamphlets in Spanish and English and Tagalog outlining safe sex practices and HIV resources and *How to Kick Your Heroin Addiction!*

“Leeches,” joked your friend. “An unkindness of leeches.”

Tomas says: “Could you wipe the water off the counter too? I don’t want it to warp.”

“Am I your maid?”

“If you’re going to do a job, do a job.”

Run the soggy cloth over the counter, the edge of the metal sink. “Speaking of half-assed,” you tell him, while you did clean out half the apartment, as per agreement, you didn’t scour out the clawfoot, conveniently neglected the blobs of gummy blue stuff that held up your posters. All the dustbunnies and unputtied nail holes were, as far as you were concerned, the inevitably messy afterbirth of your breakup.

Tomas frowns. He has never appreciated the infantilization of your spite. He stacks the triangles of pizza between sheets of wax paper. “I’m going to put on sunscreen,” he says.

“Why?” Out the window, bulbous clouds are clustering, descending.

“My risk factor’s through the roof.”

The pizza cutter’s not easy to clean. Faintly, in the bathroom, the flatulent squirt of a sunscreen tube.

A few minutes later, the family returns to the kitchen. Katrina, who rests on Ulrike’s hip, is wearing her new daffodil sunbonnet. A present from you, bought at the *Friedrichshain* flea market from hipsters with electrical fuses pierced through their ears.

“Did you get the trail mix?” Ulrike asks Tomas.

“No, but the pizza (he brings his fingers to his lips, releases them as if releasing a dove) is bellissimo.” Into a mason jar, he pours the currants, walnuts, repulsive shards of coconut.

Ulrike lowers Katrina into your outstretched arms and says: “She’s all yours.”

“Allo, uncabeh.” It’s iridescent, Katrina’s smile. Her tousled hair. The sound of your name on her lips. Uncle Ben. Though of course you’re not her uncle.

Yesterday she foretold her poop with that same exact cherubic smile. Tomas had taken Matthias to the *bioladen* for a loaf of multi-grain. Ulrike, desperate to get in some writing time, asked you to change Katrina's diaper. Sheepishly you admitted that you didn't know how. "Besides," you said, "I can't bear the thought of sticking her with a safety pin."

Despite her frustration at your prissiness, Ulrike took the time to walk you through each step. How the clean diaper goes under the dirty one in case the kid poops during changing. How wiping front to back prevents infection.

"Look at me," you said, "Mr. Slick with the talcum."

Point out the unworked spot of sunscreen on Tomas's cheek. He rubs it in. Feel Katrina's bottom. It's clean. Which is even better than the opportunity to change her diaper again. Because her happiness comes directly from your reassuring hands.

"Digital camera," says Tomas, who locates it in the stroller. "Check. Extra sweaters, check. Football," held like a baby against Matt's stomach, "check." The football signed with a choppy *OK* by Oliver Kahn himself.

Matt's wearing his eyepatch, to strengthen his weaker eye in outdoor light. "*Ich bin ein Pirat*," he brags. Then he leaps down the stairs. In German, pirate sounds crudely like pee-rat. Ideologically disastrous, the blink of Matt's LCD-lit sneakers. Epilepsy culture as response to the disfigurement of information, the numbness of overload resulting in an otherwise intelligent human being flapping on the asphalt like a self-breeding fish.

Katrina's shoes are perfectly acceptable, if a bit girlie; ruby-red with a daisy on each big toe. Shift her from side to side. Prop her, imitating Ulrike, on your protuberant

hipbone. It's not very comfortable. How does Ulrike do it? Katrina doesn't weigh much, still she feels heavy. You'd have to bulk up to be a parent. Now your friends call you *heroin chic* - your flat ass, the bulge of your arm veins. Katrina, unfazed by constant repositioning, pokes at the cold sore on your lower lip. Pretend to nibble on each finger. This makes her giggle.

Tomas and Ulrike carry the supply-heavy stroller down the last flight of stairs. Open the front door for them. If Ulrike would look up, she would see you making it seem as if holding Katrina comes naturally.

Down the sidewalk goes Matthias, past the hamburger joint modeled on the diner in *American Graffiti*. He's almost seven and a half, old enough to dart between the tourists. He pays no attention to the prostitutes standing between each parked car, wearing white or black spandex leggings, fanny packs strung tight about their butterfly waists. Always blonde, from the Ukraine, from Moldova. Callgirl Barbie. For rolled-down windows they bend sharp at the hips. Does Matt know what they do for a living?

Rebecca would have made Matt cross to the other side of the street. It was one of her few weaknesses. When confronted with homeless and Vietnam Vets, she put on the blinkers. Dreadlocks made her gag; only the visualization of a certain shade of blue could denauseate her. You laughed off her bigotry. Everyone was bigoted.

"*Baum*," says Katrina, pointing to a tree. "*Hund*." Even though she's pointing at a cat. These words you know, not much else. Your favorite German word is *abgefickt*, you learned German from Beavis and Butthead comic books.

As you pass one prostitute, say quietly: "*Guten Tag*." Why did you say that? It wasn't necessary. Maybe because it took courage; the erotic energy of prostitutes always

unnerves you. The woman shifts her weight onto one leg. “*Guten Tag*,” she replies. To your relief, not spoken as seduction.

The smell of anchovies; your favorite cheap pasta in all of Berlin. Translucent angel-hair, shakers full of grey-green oregano and chili flakes. Katrina kicks her feet and flaps her hands. Fascinated by the soundless theatrics of the Turkish hip-hop on the television above the cash register. A rapper named *Ceza*, according to the video credits. Stop to let Katrina watch, until Tomas herds you towards *Hackescher Hof*, where Matthias twirls around a bike rack and boomerangs back to you and says: “Guess what? I’ve got a stiffy!”

It’s hilarious, and reminds you that the German slang for what you call a *free willy* is *schwanz*, not *schwanger*. Reply: “Knights don’t get stiffies.” Invoking Matt’s admiration of King Arthur to transform crudeness into chivalry.

Ulrike waits until he’s again out of earshot and says: “I know it’s cute, but don’t let him think it’s okay.”

Your cold sore might be bleeding, so turn slightly away, cover your lower lip with your upper before you speak. “The phallic phase never ends, does it?”

“If by phallic you mean obsessively seeking attention, then no. You’re all right holding her?”

“Just dandy.” It feels nice to trace the grooves in Katrina’s corduroy sweater. Tell Ulrike that when you get back to SF, you’re going to enroll in German at the community college, so you can better converse with your goddaughter. Ulrike gives you a good warm hug, which stops you from adding: *in case, God forbid, something happens to you and Tomas*.

With its Lithuanian avant-garde cinema and artificial beaches and DDR ice cube trays, Berlin has become parodic, lustrous, self-reflexive. “A Starbucks?” you ask. “With velvet couches? How can you live here?”

“Aren’t we too old to live in squats?”

If you could blow up the life-sized ceramic bears that mark the city’s most infamous attractions. You miss the smoke of coal furnaces, the bullet holes that pocked the buildings, even the Neo-Nazis, who have been driven out to *Lichtenberg* and *Marzahn*.

The weekend market below the *S-Bahn* comes into view. Matthias runs, his arms winging, straight through a spurting water fountain. Ulrike chases after him. Stroll with Tomas and Katrina over to one of the stalls, to a farmer type dolled up in what might be *lederhosen*. He sells oatmeal soaps as big as bricks.

“Rebecca would have loved this hills are alive shit.”

“Let it go,” says Tomas. “You’re two totally different animals.”

“We wanted the same thing.”

“You had diametrically opposed ideas about how to do that thing.”

Don’t be mad at Tomas; it’s not his fault that Rebecca made you feel the same way Berlin is now making you feel. You have become retro without even knowing it. Reeking of obsolescence. So what if you rip the logos off your clothes? So what if you refused, despite Rebecca’s pleading, to give up your shift at needle exchange? Isn’t wheeling a covered baby buggy through the Tenderloin so that junkies could fill a red Sharp’s container with dirty points clearly a *mitzvah*? Maybe Rebecca didn’t even like

sex. Maybe she asked you to shave your goatee not because it made what she called *the underwater act* less pleasurable, but because goatees had become passé.

The faux Austrian dribbles pumpkin oil on your finger. It tastes thick and, well, like pumpkin. Let Katrina lick it off your finger. She loves it, she's making little gurgly noises. Her simple presence is an unbelievable blessing. Tomas is right. Let it go.

Unapologetically Matt shakes himself off like a river dog. He gets on his tiptoes and whispers: "Want to see my stiffy?" His longish wet hair against your cheek. Don't reply. Ulrike gives you the thumbs-up.

Tomas pushes the stroller over the cobbles to the *S-Bahn* elevator. "This *S-Bahn* was a ghost station during the cold war," he tells you. A fantastic idea. Closed ticket kiosks, the hard push of dead wind through the tunnel. The inefficiency of space being the most revolutionary response to late-stage capitalism.

Ask Ulrike, who waits in line at the salted pretzel stand: "How do you say pretzel in German?"

In an exaggerated German accent she says: "*Pretzel*."

Step onto the escalator; the tiny elevator won't fit you and Katrina. Katrina's eyes echo a blue denser than blue. Rose-pink capillaries. One day, you look forward to this, to mediating between her independence and her parents' protectionism, to scare her off binge drinking and encourage responsibly-used birth control.

On the escalator, simply because Ulrike won't let go of his hand, Matt is screaming. Set too many limits, and he'll turn out meek, inhibited. Don't set limits, and he'll be flipper-kicking out his classmates' teeth. Probably you'd act more like Tomas, implacable and a stitch too laissez-faire, too amenable to Ulrike assuming the bad cop

role. Do they disagree on the safest distance between slats on the crib? At least they would have each other's backs. Your child with Rebecca would have been alternately unmedicated and overmedicated.

Katrina reaches for the escalator rail. Lean over so she can touch it. She's diagonal, her legs above her head. How awesome to throw kids around. How awesome that kids aren't afraid of backflipping and flying through the air.

Take extra care when stepping off. There was a movie filmed at the mall where, for an entire summer, you played *Dragon's Lair*, a movie in which an evil teenage girl used her telekinetic powers to force her rival's teased hair into the crack of the escalator. Behind you, Ulrike releases Matt's hand. His temper tantrum subsides. He starts tagging the paper recycling can and the glass/plastic and the general waste. A skateboarder wearing a huge number of black rubber bracelets nearly bowls him over, but he doesn't notice.

Most of that summer, you were bleary-eyed. Detergent boxes filled with speed hidden in the saddlebags of your motorcycle. Your parents had just divorced themselves into distinct area codes. You went with your mother. You ate baked potatoes slit with Magic Shell. Mom spent her salary dyeing her hair. The saran wrap on her forehead to protect her skin from the necrotizing auburns and russets, the test strips lined up in the sink like a burnished picket fence.

It took twelve years to filter the chunks of loneliness and rage from your blood. But they're back. Obviously even Katrina knows that once again you are unclean, because she is starting to whimper and pull your hair. Croon a sweet, pacific version of *I Wanna Be Your Dog*.

The push of your goddaughter's breath on the back of your hand. Smelling like peaches, or nectarines. That's why you come each year to Berlin. Though you give different people different reasons. Where everyone has health care, people are happier. They've been forced to deal with their past. The baklava and vegetarian *spätzle*. If one refuses to frequent the places where bad stuff happened, you tell other Jews, one couldn't walk in America either, it's nothing but one unbroken genocidal field.

You told Rebecca that coming to Berlin this year, instead of splitting up according to the three C's (*creating compassionate closure*), belies a particularly virulent strain of self-destructive behavior.

"Like your addiction," she said. She looked at you warily, as if you were at any moment capable of relapse. You should have splashed your chamomile tea in her face. Your speed habit, which you had kicked more than ten years ago, had become threat and millstone and damnation.

Ulrike feeds you a piece of chewy, almost too hot pretzel. Chip off the salt crystals, let them dissolve on your tongue.

You might have salvaged the relationship. Arranged the beaded Indian pillows to better support Rebecca's back, kissed the sunken veins on her wrist while promising concessions. Instead: "Yes, I most certainly do suck, I must really hate myself."

When you land in San Francisco, you'll give your engagement ring to a female customs officer. "We don't accept tips," she'll say. You'll tell her it's contraband. Tell her to confiscate it.

Tomas has come up in the elevator. Ask him: "Do I need a ticket?"

"Unfortunately, our family pass isn't plus one."

Sneaking onto public transportation is a matter of principle, like giving donations instead of paying taxes. A few years ago, at the *Görlitzer Bahnhof*, you got caught freeloading. You spoke Hebrew to the controller; he let you off with a warning. In Germany, speaking Hebrew is a sure-fire *Get Out Of Jail Free Card*. But even at twenty-five months, Katrina is imprinting. And last year, when Matthias saw you jaywalk, he denounced you, as Germans do, as a child murderer. So tell Tomas that you're out of small money. He calls you a mooch. Since you've got Katrina, he runs over to the ticket machine.

"You wouldn't believe," sighs Ulrike, "how much I'm craving a boat ride. I think we'll have time after we eat. Will you row so we can sit with the kids?" Her eyes are not quite round - like hazelnuts. Old texts, she explains, are often more postmodern than new ones. The absurd impossibility of a single historical line. And the crazy combover of her pig-headed committee chair. "Who returned one of my chapters," she says, "because the margins were too narrow."

"How unbelievably nit-picky."

She plucks something out of your scraggly hair.

"What is it?"

"A nit." She thinks that's hysterical. Matt's on his hands and knees, peeling a circle of blackened gum off the platform. Ulrike beckons him over. "Three meters, that's your radius."

Matt doesn't listen.

"Matthias," you call, "closer. That is not three meters."

"You don't come from meters!"

The train is curving around the bend from *Alexanderplatz*. “The machine keeps spitting back the bills!” says Tomas. Ulrike warns Matthias away from the tracks. Frantically she starts slotting change in the ticket dispenser.

Katrina’s half-asleep. Peck her chubby cheeks, especially the little roseate patches. The engine rolls past you, the squeak of the braking train. Matt stands close to the platform’s edge, counting the cars.

“Matt,” you say, “get over here!”

“I’m safe!” he protests. He does, however, take a single step back.

A security camera sits high atop the glass lattice of the domed station. It recognizes you, the eye in this chaos that is family life on public transportation. Calm, reliable.

How come Rebecca couldn’t see that? “I woke up this morning,” she said, this morning being two weeks and two days ago, “and some icky crust was in your ear, and I knew you weren’t good enough to be the father of my children.”

“Twenty more cents!” yells Ulrike.

The train stops, the doors slide open. Matt disappears in the crush of people embarking and disembarking. Soon you catch sight of him again.

“Ticket – is – printing,” Ulrike says. A light starts to blink on the outside of the train. “Go! Go! Go!” shouts Tomas. He runs past you with the stroller. Ulrike follows him towards the train. Walk fast, cradling Katrina’s head.

Matthias gets on first, springing over the gap like a frog. And then the doors slide shut. With you and Katrina and Tomas and Ulrike still on the platform.

Inside the train, Matthias turns around. An apocalyptic look on his face. You can't hear his shriek, but you see it, his mouth a big fish-face O. He bangs his fists against the safety glass. The window's dull shudder is the most terrible sound you have ever heard. Ulrike screams, pushes the *door open* button. Nothing happens. Tomas sprints over to the nearest *S-Bahn* employee, who is inserting a large key into a yellow pillar. Ulrike puts her face right up against the glass. Tears are sparkling off Matt's face. Yell in the direction of the first car: "Don't go anywhere!" Though the driver's window is closed. Move in closer, shoulder to shoulder with Ulrike. Katrina is crying. Matthias keeps shrieking and doing Donkey-Kong stomps. Maybe you can distract him. Try purposefully stupid tricks with your tongue. Roll it into a tube, fold it into a squishy mass.

"You're not helping!" says Ulrike. Step back, glare at the train as if it was inhabited by a supernatural malevolence. Some parent you'd be. You should have held his hand. Katrina is wailing now. Hold her more tightly. Tears flutter onto your arm. Ulrike takes out her cell phone, types what is probably her number, and shows the display to a woman inside the train. Resourceful. While the woman copies the number into her *handy*, the skater attempts to pry open the adjacent door. Using his board as a lever. At that moment the doors open. The skater thinks he's responsible, he lets out a whoop and gives the Black Power salute to the sky. Matt jumps onto the platform and wraps his arms around his mother's leg.

Everyone gets back on the train. Bystanders are clapping. Ulrike thanks the woman, holds her ringless hands together as if using them to pray. The woman wears the thin rectangular red-framed glasses seemingly available only to attractive German women and the heroine of *Alias* when undercover in Berlin. Two elderly ladies give up their seats

to Ulrike and Tomas. The skater solicits a high-five from Matt, who nestles shyly in Ulrike's lap; he's heaving tears and has no idea what a high-five is. No matter what you do, Katrina keeps blowing out her lungs. Ulrike asks you to give them space. Go find a pole to hang on to. It's the least you can do.

Rebecca was right. You can't multitask, you're poor under pressure. You've made Ulrike late with her deadlines and delayed their weekly movie night and Matt could have been abducted or worse and you were worthless.

Out the window, by the river, happy couples are drinking latté macchiatos under Bacardi-bat sunbrellas.

Sternly Ulrike cements the terror in Matthias. Then Tomas has his turn. "There's a lost and found for children at Zoo," he tells Matt. Ulrike huffs and starts to mark up her dissertation abstract. As punishment for losing their parents, children get strapped to machines that stretch their arms and legs. The enslaved children are forced to feed eucalyptus leaves to the giraffes. Matt starts giggling.

Still you feel like shit, but the story amuses you. Katrina's calming down. Pale salt trails taper down her cheeks.

Ulrike says: "What's making it nice going to accomplish?"

On the plane from SF to Berlin, you sat next to a father and his strawberry-haired son, who for the whole flight remained engrossed in his computer game – life after life eviscerated by the pincer of a giant red tick. During turbulence, the father grabbed his son's arm and said: "We're gonna crash!" Preparing his son for catastrophe, damaging him through the execution of his own anxieties.

You would, not even knowing it, wilt your own child.

Henceforth you will disseminate rumors that your parts have problems. It's the most direct way to protect women from the fact of you. Katrina's eyelids shut, open, shut. Finally she's quiet; not by anything you've done. A guy wearing a long-sleeved Scorpions shirt hovers suspiciously near Katrina's stroller. Rummage through its contents - the sweating bottle of white wine, the frog-on-lily-pad blanket - until hair metal guy threads his hand through his mullet and moves away.

Matthias is finger-drawing on the window. Maybe swords, or lions, or even willies. As long as it's not lonely orphaned pirate boys on empty trains.

Next year, as usual, you will bring Katrina's usual assortment of kitschy, age-inappropriate religious primers, *Charlton Heston Presents The Bible* and *The Hip-Hop Koran for Kids*, but you will recuse yourself from anything sticky, emotionally entangled, physically volatile. Anything where you could hurt her.

There goes the *Hamburger Bahnhof Museum*, where you once saw an exhibit showcasing an F-15 fighter plane, thousands of holes cut out of the metal skeleton. Kiefer. The shadowed innards, body shot through with light. If you could have taken Rebecca to see this, she would have understood everything about you. No. She preferred Monet or Beethoven: artists, radical in their era, diluted into tradition by the force of time.

It's simple: she didn't love you. Didn't share your beliefs. Even with children, you argued, one has a responsibility to remain ruthlessly vibrant to one's self. She found that hideous, unconscionable. But wouldn't such self-belief actually make you a better father?

For fuck's sake, like Tomas says, kids get into pickles all the time. Every household object ghosted with imminent disaster. Chipped tooth on goalpost, overturned tricycle, every stumbling child's delirious scamper dangerously close to the onrushing train, the unfenced edge of every precipice. You can't save them, not every time.

That won't stop you from trying.

Take Katrina over to Ulrike and say: "I'm real sorry about this drama."

Tomas shrugs. "Sorry about what?"

"I should have ordered him to stand by me."

"Pah. I said go, and he went."

Your most grateful and endearing smile makes concentric parentheses around your mouth. "He's a wild one," you say to Ulrike, pointing at Matt, "isn't he?"

Ulrike says, "Really."

"What?"

"Really sorry. It's an adverb." She shuts her eyes.

Go back to your pole. Someone has keyscratched the word *Sesamstrasse* into it.

Bellevue, Tiergarten. The train stops. Matt bounds down the stairs. There's no holding him back. In the park, Tomas tells you about the old-fashioned streetlamps. He's relaxed. As if it never happened. Matthias drags a big branch behind him like a security blanket. Ulrike keeps her hand on his head. Your thumb, you notice, is exactly the same size as Katrina's ear canal. "This one's from Leipzig," says Tomas, "you can tell by the shape of the filaments."

On your right, the squid-shaped lake where you'll rent the boat. Magnolias drooping over a *biergarten*. It starts to rain. Take the sunbonnet from the stroller. Katrina

had pneumonia last May, she shouldn't get wet. With the angle of her lolling head, you struggle to set the elastic chin strap. Ulrike takes her away from you. Brusquely, harshly. "The strap's too far under her throat," she tells you. "You'll choke her that way."

Tomas shouldn't roll his eyes. Let Ulrike be angry. It's called caring.

If you take off your watch, time will stop, you won't have to go home. Tomas's softball team of aging hipsters needs a second baseman, the last one overdosed in the visitor's dugout. You'll play football with Matt. He can be *Deutschland* and you can be Argentina and you can let him win. You'll marry a waif of a German with fishnet stockings, a tattoo of tiny wings on the back of her neck. Pregnancies in the bathtub, a midwife doing the delivery. You'll name your first daughter Maya; the Sanskrit word for illusion. Katrina will be her surrogate older sister. They will swim together at *Montbijoux Park*, swing with their legs hooked around the monkey bars, their long hair streaming towards the sandpit. Maya, when she outgrows her slippered pajamas, will inherit your first skateboard, your favorite oversized *Dead Kennedys* t-shirt. She'll be the most precious little punk. She'll be unstoppable.

SOUTHWEST OF GUADALAJARA

The 6 by 8 cell, painted a sickly yellow, unseated toilet and writing desk, moss covered bricks, Hess gone crazy and rambling in hoarse demand about the glory days, the world in our fists! Then silence, then weeping.

We dressed by gaslamp, addressed each other by title. Volumes of concrete, angle of ruined column. We built far beyond scale. The horizon bleached with spotlight. And now? *we blot your light* All we touched was tainted. Dark months of pneumonia, wet sputum. The suffocating mold on the prison ceiling that chokes my lungs with gauze.

Nuremberg. One by one, we sat on the same wooden, high-backed chair, awkward throne, its armrests too high for arms. For months, we hadn't shaven, hadn't seen ourselves in mirrors. The prosecutors snapped the photographs onto the table like playing cards. The press, especially the Americans, treated me with guilty kindness. They knew I was not butcher, not Göring, who killed himself in his cell, who jittered in his seat, tapering slowly off the morphine, rolls of fat draining from his addiction. The sodium bulbs irradiated the court. Though I looked each man in the eye, I did not doubt that they would hang me.

Twenty years in Spandau. Less a day, a single day until my release. My sons no longer speak to me. As my own breath warmed Margret's face on frigid mornings, walking the

dogs through the thick woods, now she writes less often, with austere formality. I must wear this shabby grey uniform once worn by those in the concentration camps. The ironic pall of disinfectant drifts through my cell.

What is certain? That the trial photographers found no significant widening of my iris, the tendons of my wrist did not tighten. The Russians condemned this as proof of guilt. I did, however, feel disgust. These photographs taught me this genius of our terror. Storage lockers, intended to improve work conditions, used as torture chambers, ice water spilling through its air vents onto stubbled heads. When I told the prosecutors I knew nothing, *we parch your spit* I spoke the truth. Yet I did know. I knew, in retrospect, by silence, by Hess walking in late to meetings, smiling grimly, and so many euphemisms. Hess, who for hours runs his stumpy fingers along the cell bars, making a crude instrument that echoes the halls and stops our sleep.

I study dusty copies of Augustine, Aquinas, Ptolemy. For the first three years, the rector, Casalis, gave me catechism on Karl Barth's Dogmatik. Before breakfast I perform calisthenics. Each Sunday the nurse cuts my toenails – they become ingrown so easily. In general, not five minutes a day do I speak.

What I have unleashed on this world is technique, *we erode your logic* the organization and structure of inhumanity. My train tracks lined with the rail ties of the dead, by the dead, for the dead. The jurors misinterpreted my horror. It was not the large

basins sloped to drain the blood. Then, the dead concerned me only as factors of inefficiency. A brain such as mine does not believe in the waste of killing.

It is for others to describe what I saw in these photos. Even now, with only Hess and myself and von Schirach left in this prison, survivors of the camps smell history in the weave of their clothes. In their dreams they speak what little German they were forced to learn.

For my grandchildren, I have created a fantastical universe that I call “Spanish Illustrated.” This imaginary forest I inhabit has a border of chestnut trees barnacled in purple starfish. I eat bird’s eggs the size of pine cones. The graceful, slender branches of another tree hover over an exactly circular lake. If it is a particularly cold day, *we frost your eyelids* I write to my grandchildren, you can jump off the rope swing and you will land in a bath of warm cocoa. The guard who smuggles out these more politically delicate letters tells me they are very humorous. Why don’t you add a froth of whipped cream atop the lake, he suggests, to represent the scum of stagnant water in our garden’s small pond?

I waited for the photo that would condemn me to the gallows, my pistol pointed at another’s head, but it did not come. My pistol, its mother of pearl handle, used for idle sport and oiling. At Nuremberg, the audience hissed at me. They pounded on their seats. With their fingers they made the guillotine, the hangman; responsibility for murder extends beyond the man who commits the act. Under this burden I have learned to atone,

and to fail to atone. After the tribunal sentenced us, they forced us to mop the fluids off the gymnasium floor where the others had been hung. Hess saluted the stain.

Each day, rain or shine, we walked around the small garden. There were seven of us, distinguishable only by number. I was no longer Speer. I was 5. We were each given a small patch of land to cultivate. I decided to grow exotics; bromeliads, stargazer lilies. The SS men, ridiculously territorial, planted potatoes and acorn squash they would not share. That first year, the spring clouds were shaped like continents. I walked only to feel fresh rain spatter my balding head, to smell farm animals, their droppings, near the prison. I learned the waxy skin of summer tomatoes, *we sand your fingerprints* when the Linden leaves dropped, the crunch of winter's last snow under foot, the flock formation of each species through the spring wind.

After calculating the length of the garden's perimeter, *we break your order* I added the distance of each of my circuits to the next. Day to day, mile to mile. As if I was walking this earth I could not walk, I plotted a route to circle the globe. It will take me sixty-three years. Beginning in Berlin at the Brandenburger Tor, my first year took me across Belgium and into the Atlantic, then Great Britain, crossing north of Manchester.

It is not uncommon that survivors send me the only photographs of those they lost. They force me to consider the living image of the extinguished, their uncreased suits and Florentine hats. I must sign documents. I must tear them from their homes, send them by train to the lice-ridden barracks. I keep each photograph in a cigar box, in the same stack

as the photographs of my family. Photos of my children and grandchildren aging, each year Margret's hair growing more gray and more severe in her bun, but these people are immortal, *we salt your skin* they do not grow old.

I walked towards warmer climes, across glaciers in the North Atlantic, through the Bermuda Triangle, over Martinique. *we blister your feet* It made me laugh to think these last years *we file your teeth we sew your lips* I have been walking on water. Hess used to laugh for no reason, now he groans like a dog shot in the stomach. For nineteen years, he claims he has been poisoned. Crushed glass in his food.

The warden has asked me to build his new house. I am loath to admit, I have not felt this excited since my first commission. So well I remember *we scald your tongue we infest your ruins* working without sleep, the heat of the coffee mug in my palms, the rush to complete what had been impossibly promised, pushing the pure numbers of the golden mean into the materiality of porticos and casement windows. The questions I now ask: how *we dim your current* to let in light but retain privacy. How ideology seeps into architecture. How contaminated I would feel waking up in a house I designed.

The Russian guards told me of their relatives killed in the war. By the perfection of my infrastructure, *we spoil your silence* though they did not say it. In this respect they were generous. When they retired, I had Margret send them a stipend. Their sons replaced them. Inevitably, having been shown films of the camps, they searched my body crudely.

I had to shovel my own waste. I hid scraps of toilet paper in my socks. No matter what they took, *we soil your desire* I began again. And again.

When I am released, *we fissure your language* I will go door to door offering my sympathies, like a traveling salesman. I will carry a black briefcase with gold latches. No. It is overly symbolic. The backs of my teeth feel ragged under my tongue. I should amputate myself limb by *we rust your instruments* limb, but we acclimatize to our losses, don't we? One forgets what one lacks. How much atonement is sufficient? As it is inestimable, I err on the side more severe. Those who wanted me killed at Nuremberg still write me letters, simply to remind me, to torture me. I respond to each correspondence, but there is no solace in admission, no relief in confession. Perhaps that is good. Or I would be, even here, where *we crowd your sky* I can do nothing about the aphids but pick them impotently off the tomatoes, where twenty years of squinting through the buzz of the electric light has caused my temples to throb without end, here where the snow flies through the bars, puddling in the corners of my cell, *we dampen your thought* I would be free.

Every year, on the same day, *we bonfire your books* someone throws a dead lamb in front of our fence. The lamb's throat has been cut. Autumn, and the blood pools in the cups of the fallen leaves.

If I must imagine them, I must also imagine them imagining me. They would want to preserve my heart at its most painfully heavy, leaden, crushed like a paper ball, atrophied,

bloodless. They would place this heart inside a glass case. An index card will say, 'Albert Speer, Hitler's Architect,' naming for posterity this most pure alloy of evil. Sadly, this rendering does not account for the beauty, no matter how mislaid, of magnetic attraction, it does not recognize the complementary principle of contraction and expansion that, as scientists have shown, is fundamental to the human heart.

Six months ago, I reached dry land. Mexico. As the sunflowers surrounding the prison blow their seed in the wind, *we dissolve your spirit* I have learned the species of local cacti. Cholla, saguaro. Piercing spines, shallow roots. Each step around this garden draws me closer to death; long before I return through Poland, *we lose your history we curdle your milk* I will be dust. For that I cannot say I am not thankful. Nonetheless, *we burn your house we break your line we cripple your hand* I have asked that the archive of my sketches be transferred to Heidelberg. I will get back to work.

Tomorrow the Allies release me from Spandau. Margret has received my telegraph, but she is too weak to walk, she has sent my driver Rudolf. There will be people shaking the prison gates, people who wish me dead. They will not kill me. I am worth more to them alive. Without me, *we forget your memories* there will be no one left to forgive. They do not understand what it costs to take apart the terror, the years to bilge up the oil of a black soul and make something clean of it. I forgive their hatred. Someone must be the first. I am by no means the first. Outside prison, on the outskirts of Berlin, *we pollute your Jerusalem* I will listen to the leaves crack under my feet. At a cafe I

will drop a slice of lemon into a weissbier, and from that I will derive some small comfort. Rudolf, please pick me up exactly 50 kilometers southwest of Guadalajara, I will be waiting there.

STRAWBELLIES

Behind the bathroom door, the insecure flicker of Mina's angel-wing nightlight. The walls above the folding bench scabbed with the trace of thrown-open suitcases.

Theo props himself up on his elbow. It's 5:45 AM. Every color in this crusty motel room flattened to slate. He rests his hand on Jo's back, covering the raised birthmark she refers to as the salt shaker. Right over T4. Each year he measures it for her.

Their bodies had changed with age, the eruption of scattered freckles like rusty stars. Her sleep smell used to be rich, faintly fennel, almost woodsy. Now it is dampened, as if the meds which she has taken for nine months, since Mina's eighth birthday, inhibit her scent.

Theo and Jo hadn't, however, curdled completely; they had retained so much of themselves. The thrush of hair on his tanned hands, a wedding band of unadorned gold that radiated constancy, solidity. And the skin on Jo's back still taut, cool from a short night's worth of air-conditioning.

He could spoon her, bring her gently into wakefulness, try to make love to her without disturbing Mina's twitchy sleep in the spare cot. At least the attempt would count for something, something tender, before Jo remembers where she is. But what would it realign? She would wake up slackly lethargic, or spinningly anxious, and shame away his seduction - disrespectful to Jared's memory. She would still be fuming about last night. They arrived late, their schedule thrown off. Jo wanted the alarm set earlier than usual;

Theo saw no reason to change their routine. And because Theo, disregarding the doctor's insinuation that Mina had an attention deficit, bought her an antifreeze blue Slurpie. Mina further aggravated Jo by trampolining on the box mattress. After how tightly Jo tucked her in, Mina could barely turn over in her sheets.

Theo expects to find Mina balled up, her hands in hidden-thumb fists. But Mina isn't there, and her tennis racquet isn't leaning against the cot frame. He rolls off the bed. In the bathroom, he labors with clothes he had folded the night before and placed on the counter in the order which he would dress. To put on his khaki shorts, he stands on one leg, teetering like an ice dancer who spins without a spotting point.

*

His movements, though unsteady and too loud, hold no urgency. Lately Mina had made a habit, or a point, of slipping unnoticed from the house. Exploring the gutters and storm drains of their suburbia, bringing home treats like a hunter cat: a moldy, iridescent orange, or a box of rained-on firecrackers.

Mina's forays never bothered Theo; he liked how she turned found objects into new toys, and she would gain valuable experience unsupervised. Mina had people guessing she was twelve. Commensurate with her maturity, Theo encouraged her to call him by his first name, which she distorted into mutations such as Theodophilus, after learning about the bacteria in certain dairy products. On the infrequent nights when he handled her bedtime, they counted bones instead of sheep.

Jo tried to keep her inside. Mina shook her head and pretended to breathe fire and went out anyway. Once, on a weekend, when Jo and Theo's tasks had them blocking off both front and back doors, Mina even popped out her bedroom window screen. Upon her

return, Jo asked for Theo's intervention. He asked Mina why she snuck out, and she replied: "To ruminate?"

"Good reason," chuckled Theo. "Don't stray too far."

Jo waited until that evening to convey her rage. Theo and Mina were conspiring against her. "Half a parent or half a husband," she said. "I can't decide what's worse."

*

Theo switches off Mina's nightlight. Really the light is for Jo. Mina doesn't fear the dark.

He slips on his sandals. How many days in a lifetime wasted, simply tying and untying one's shoes. The alarm won't go off for another half an hour. Should he wake Jo? No. Her spiraling narratives would have Mina heatstroked and dehydrated, devoured by mountain lions, venommed by sidewinders. So long as they get back before she wakes, better to let Jo sleep her murky sleep.

Quietly he closes the door behind him. Beyond the too-green lawn, there's an Olympic sized swimming pool, its edge necklaced by bees. Mina loves to swim, even more to float. A few months ago, in the city pool, she shooed away a bee, which promptly stung her friend. He swelled up, soon apoplectic, unconscious. Only quick thinking by a bystander, herself a sufferer of nut allergies, saved Mina's friend. Mina developed a phobia against bees and wasps, developed a hypnotic fascination with the EpiPen and its revivifying properties.

*

Eleven years to the day since Jared died. And ten years to the day that Theo had, with only a single star in the sky, opened a motel room door at the Furnace Creek Ranch. Furnace Creek, the so-called gateway to Death Valley.

That first anniversary of Jared's death, he and Jo couldn't sleep, their nervous systems flooded. At four in the morning they made love, frantic, awkward, in the cramped shower. After climax, Jo had revealed, embarrassed confessional, that in grade school she had been called Sloppy Jo. Theo ran his fingers along Jo's scar. Jo cried, held his hand there. In what they simply referred to as the accident, she had been imprinted with the leather steering wheel, and the scar looked like a speckled curve of pipe across her then-crushed hips.

They overslept. It was hotter than usual, almost 120, not a car on the shimmering road. They blasted the air conditioning, which blew sand out the vents. While the tourists headed to Dante's View, Theo chauffeured Jo up Highway 190 and onto Scotty's Castle Road. At the mile marker they stopped. She asked him to walk with her. He didn't respond, didn't move, didn't know why. She stepped out of the car. Cloudless sky. The air hung heavy, inert. The heat crushed the air from her lungs. She held a can of Coke against her forehead. How could she have lost control of the car in such perfect weather, with so few distractions, on such a straight road? She started to talk to Jared, explaining to him what his schoolmates had drawn: antlered deer, flowers, a dragonfly. Sheets of colored construction paper laid into his coffin.

Finally she walked back. Theo rolled down his window.

"There's blood still on the ground," she said.

“Not possible,” he said dismissively. He lifted up his sunglasses; the pressure of the bridge chafed his nose. He was irate, felt sucker-punched, didn’t know why he had come. All he knew was that he didn’t know how to negotiate a world so unfocused and aleatory and painful. Obviously being here wouldn’t change anything, wouldn’t decrease the number of times he found one of Jared’s toys in some crack of the house, wouldn’t lighten the hours he spent picking nubs from his socks. How stupid, naïve, allowing Jo to convince him that a return to this desert of coruscated sandstone would allow them to move forward, would transform his grief, a thick sorrow which he visualized as a cowboy’s hat made of concrete.

“How can you say that?” asked Jo. “You haven’t left the car. And it never rains here.”

“There’s nothing here, I’m telling you!”

“Maybe you’re not ready,” she said. “Maybe it’s too soon.”

“What do you hope to gain by doing this?”

“I don’t know! I want to feel his presence.”

“I’m ready to leave. Please get in.”

He made his u-turn before she could pull the seat belt across her chest.

“See you next year,” Jo said to Jared.

“What point is there in coming back?” Theo asked.

*

Theo heads towards the borax museum. Borax, a laundry whitener, the only commodity worthy of export from Death Valley.

Mina's not climbing the steam engine, or the chute dusted with brown pine needles, or the wagon wheels. An apple core sits on the edge of a trash barrel. It offends him, the apple so close to its destination, and he nudges it down. The plunk of it hitting bottom.

He detours to the gravel parking lot, where tourists are applying sunscreen, folding themselves into rental cars. Theo goes right up to their minivan. Once he found Mina taking an afternoon nap; not on the back seat, but on the floor. Now he sees yesterday's fast-food wrappers stuffed into a paper bag, less an unopened mustard packet that had somehow eluded last night's sweep. Mina's book on dinosaurs, teepeed open. Always a pacifist on the cover: a meek baby steg, or a diplodocus dumbly ripping branches from a leafy tree.

Briskly he crosses the road. A hazy, placid desert of scrub that belies its perils, the Funeral Mountains in corona of the invisible sun. Desperate settlers in search of short cuts. A big rig lumbers towards him. It makes him wary. The roads smoothly paved and clearly marked, but the monotony of landscape, the crystalline sparkle of salt flats, the shifting sands make mirage.

The truck's rumble accretes in his ears. He catches a glimpse of the driver's pork chop sideburns. Hard air from the truck's path forces him to step back, pebbles kick up at his shins. The truck pulls away, and he trains his sight a quarter mile ahead. It's a weak-minded habit, a reflex designed to anticipate tragedy. When you hear a plane overhead, the brain doesn't factor in the time it takes for sound to travel. You're a step too late, you look where the plane was, you see nothing but blue sky and the bubble of a lazy cloud.

He sees Mina walking on the shoulder ahead of him. As always, she bounces her tennis ball on her racquet. The truck bears down on her. Should he warn her? She's too far away to hear him. Unlike most fathers, who would jump up and down like apes, he refuses to be hysterical, not again.

*

After the accident, Jo refused to drive. Eleven years without setting her hands on a steering wheel. And after that first return to Furnace Creek, Theo refused to take her back. Jo continued to bring up the way Jared loved to turn the windshield wipers on and off, how he called broccoli "little trees."

Each time Theo stomped out of the room. Eventually Jo kept Jared to herself.

Otherwise, they made a concerted effort to build routine, to recapture the pleasures of domestic life. Theo was becoming a leader in the developing field of waste anthropology. He worked twelve-hour days at dumpsites, landfill, toxic drop points. Grubby and fermented. Steeped in methane, though he couldn't smell or taste it; steeped in the expelled gas of rats and eviscerated dogs. Trash, he theorized, was like the fecal matter of the city, revealing far more than what you kept. One's possessions, as sources of sociological data, were unreliable; trash was indisputable. Waste was revelation.

Jo made dinner each evening. She liked to spice up standard recipes with one exotic ingredient. Coriander, fennel, ancho chilies. As he watched her, Theo steeped and unsteeped his fingertips, brought back life to his nerves. Hours after he took off his rubber gloves, his fingertips still felt numb, as if sandpapered.

At night, he did pushups in white underwear and a thin white v-neck. He mused over perfume stoppers ornamented in gold leaf, the thousand-year dissolve of carbon

paper, the way hair dryers in the sixties were marbled like bowling balls. Jo propped herself in bed against a rust-colored bolster and told Theo about the blind men whom she helped each week. “He knew from the timbre of pouring water into the coffeemaker,” she said, “that I was making extra cups for the next morning. Can you believe?”

“Yes,” he said. “I believe.”

Sex was, mercifully, mischief. As if conspiring with him to find humor in unlikely places, Jo tilted her head, her eyebrows delightfully golden, her eyes a darker shade than hazel. As if they were trying to find each other’s body, bodies untouched by sorrow.

In the second year after Jared’s death, Jo started to imagine herself pregnant. Imagining herself growing. And finally she was.

*

The truck charges past Mina. Two long blasts from the airhorn, and Theo’s fingertips push hard, harder into his pockets. What little oxygen siphons into him stays trapped high in his chest. Like a rag doll, he thinks, expecting his daughter’s body to be borne into the air. He bites the inside of his cheek, ashamed of his doomsday sentimentality, more so when the truck’s wake, a twister of dust, doesn’t even reach her.

He hurries now. To his right, the empty campground parking lot gives way to a busted-up cyclone fence, which encloses another empty parking lot. Soon he can hear the ball bouncing on her racquet.

“Are you running away again?” he asks playfully.

“I’m not lunning.”

Theo snorts. He and Jo have had heated discussions over why Mina has, since her last birthday, occasionally insisted on imitating a Chinese accent. No, imitating an

imitation of a Chinese accent, and only when speaking to them. Losing, gaining, transforming consonants. Jo thinks it a sort of infantilism, a linguistic fetal position that reflects poorly on her maternal abilities. He believes it to be an innocent but offensive affectation. Once, when she should have been balancing her allowance passbook, he caught her watching a re-run of Hong Kong Phooey. That was his idea, the passbook. Jo thought it age-inappropriate.

“One-thirty-one,” she counts the ball hitting the racquet, “one-thirty-two.”

His frustration dissipates. It mesmerizes him every time, the way she looks forward without moving her eyes, never directly at the ball, keeping the ball aloft. At once gazing through and looking past.

“Let’s make a turnaround,” he says. He drapes his arm over her shoulders.

She shrugs him off. “Why?”

“It’s a special day for mom. You know that.”

“I don’t want to meet him.”

That’s Jo’s language. As if Jared’s spirit sat there in lotus position, hovering a foot above a rock, communing with the chuckwalla lizards.

“I’m not kidding,” he says. “Let’s go wake up your mother.”

“Fine.” As protest, Mina smacks the tennis ball high in the air. Theo tries to grab it; the ball bounces off his hand. When Mina goes to pick it up, she notices the huge sign, Furnace Creek Fun Center, the fluorescent light cover hanging by a hinge like a shutter in a ghost town. Immediately she takes off, still wearing her Winnie the Pooh pajamas, down a sloping, potholed driveway, flying wildly towards a miniature golf course.

“Mina!” shouts Theo. At first, he doesn’t follow her. She’s flapping her arms, the tennis racquet extending out like an elongated wing. She’s irreverent, magnificent. Like a child. He runs, catches up to her at one of the holes. “We’re going,” he says sharply. “Neither of us want your mother angry.”

Mina sets a midnight-blue golf ball and her tennis ball in divots on an Astroturf mat. “One hole? Please?”

*

When had they last really played together? Seven or eight months ago, not long after Jo started to shift. Mina dreamed up a variation of Dodge Ball, throwing olives that had fallen from the backyard tree. Mushy, rotten olives that pinged his head and stained his clothes the blackest blue. His muscles were sore the next morning from the jerky movements he used to avoid being hit – he must have looked like a spastic hula hooper.

Jo was unhappy with their filth. All dirt elicited in Jo an unbalanced grimace that made the offending party feel unworthy for detouring her from the singular labor of keeping Mina safe. Notes covered the marginalia of her parenting books. She lowered Mina’s bedtime. She even did a feng shui analysis of the position of Mina’s new bunk bed. She couldn’t fathom why in the world Mina wanted a bunk bed – for sleepovers, Mina said. She chose it over the promise of a pet rabbit.

Any polite, joking, or off-hand reference to Jo’s increasingly dogmatic sensibilities resulted in days darkened by her contempt. “I don’t undermine your attempt at parenting,” she said to Theo. “Don’t undermine mine.” On the rare occasions she consented to have sex with him, she contorted her face, sucked her thin lips into her mouth. She panicked without the light on, but the light made her look ugly and unlovable.

*

The golf course is decompiling. Peeling sheet metal, electrical wires limp as wet hair in high humidity. Pirate's booty and leprechaun's lair, one hole depicting either Moby Dick or Jonah and the Whale.

Theo wants to play; he does. Still, the sun's almost over the mountains. If Jo has woken up, she will be stomach down, the pillows in her fists, kicking the bed. Her long, golden-frizzy hair spread over the sheets.

"One hole only," he says to Mina.

"I go first." She flips the racquet, holding it by the top of the frame. Her overly aggressive swing. The golf ball, however, rolls smoothly up the putting surface, which is the washed-out pink of candy hearts. The ball catapults left at a concrete angle, into a wedding chapel displaying banners that read You're Mine! and Puppy Love.

"Nice shot," Theo says dryly.

She hands him the racquet. "Let's see you do it better."

Theo's tennis ball goes flailing off course, comes to rest in a dry lagoon; a green gem among water-smooth stones and beer cans.

"One shot penalty!" Mina says.

"Mulligan."

"What's a mulligan?"

"It's a do-over." Childish, that he wants to win. At best, the contest will end in a draw. If the tennis ball does enter the chapel, it will choke the PVC tubing that spirals down to the hole.

The second time, he almost misses the ball completely. It goes about twenty feet up the slope, stops, accelerates back down towards him.

“Two slot penalty!” Mina yells, hopping from foot to pajama-padded foot. “Two slots!”

“Dammit, Mina!” The ball jumps over his sandal and bounces towards a fairy castle ribboned in graffiti. “Can you for once speak proper English?”

How quickly Mina’s cheeks flush, how quickly her eyes fill with tears.

Stupid Theo, scolding her for her speech patterns. He tries to gather her in. She steps back, wipes out her eyes. “Two shots.”

Theo chews on his lip. She is overcorrecting her camouflage, fine-tuning her defenses. Already she has learned how to take her leave of them. In some indeterminate future, she will run off to a liberal arts university, move to Tokyo or Helsinki for a man with soft hands, she will spin her distance from her parents as fate or bad luck.

“Sorry,” he says.

“It’s okay.” Her light tone. Forgiving him why? Because she can’t take him seriously. Her father, this grown man holding a tennis racquet with the face of Hello Kitty stencil-painted on the strings.

“It’s okay,” she repeats, “because I win!”

She does a giddy little victory dance. He mimics her dance, badly, and she laughs at him. It’s glorious, her open-mouthed smile, half baby teeth and half permanent, like a jagged saw.

“Let’s wake your mother,” he says. “I’m starved.” It’s unlike him, this craving for greasy food. “As champion, you can have anything on the menu.”

“Chocolate pancakes! And strawbellies!”

She covers her mouth with her hand. In jest, he wags his finger at her.

“Piggyback?” he asks. He kneels, picks her up, holds her by her ankles. They run across the desert, through silver cholla and fishhook cactus. The smell of creosote is bitter and fresh, of the dawn. With her racquet, Mina swats gleefully at angelflies. She rests her free hand on his shoulder, doesn’t dig her nails into his skin. Her little girl’s hand is more than enough.

*

Funny and brutal that Mina, who was and is nothing but miracle, could have been responsible for triggering such a drastic change in Jo. Theo had thought that Jo’s yearly letters, written on the anniversary of Jared’s death, did the work of releasing enough pressure on the valve that was their unspoken compact; that opposing modes of mourning would be plugged by the placid surface of their regulated days.

Of course, the days leading up to the anniversary of the accident saw, predictably and stereotypically, Theo spending longer hours at work, eating more soups than usual, as if he didn’t have the energy to chew, and Jo, biting her nails, referring without response back to memories of Jared - how he rolled up the cuffs of his pants, scampered around the house with chess pieces sticking from his ears.

Each year, Jo’s letter updated him on his new sister, Theo’s new jobs, new homes – they moved, despite Theo’s protests, every two years or so. Once Jo tried to show Theo what she wrote. Theo admonished her to write in block letters - Jared hadn’t yet learned how to read cursive well. Without Theo’s knowledge or consent, Jo signed the end of the letter From Your Loving Mommy and Daddy.

In retrospect, it was stupid of Theo not to guess that something as arbitrary as a recurrence of a date – Mina’s eighth birthday, Jared’s age when he died – would provoke a shift in Jo, an anxious tremoring of their life, and, closer to the anniversary, some absolute need to bring he and Mina back to the crash site.

Why did he agree to drive? Because some ritual activity, or simply Mina’s survival past the date of Jared’s death, might actually break Jo from her mania. Because he couldn’t stand the occasional sight of Jo, in the backyard, lying on their red and white striped chaise lounge, pinching out her cigarette without first dipping her fingers in the pool. Two fingers burnt and soot black.

*

Mina is lightly kicking Theo’s chest. “You have to stop,” she says.

Theo squeezes Mina’s legs, turns them so they can look both ways, runs them across the road. A man with a cane tucked under his arm steps down from his RV. Theo likes the Good Sam Club sticker on the back of the RV, takes solace in the fact that an ordinary guy with fat cheeks and a receding hairline could merit a gold halo floating above his one-eared head.

Crows, everywhere. One lords over the recycling bins in front of the general store, keeping its mouth open to stay cool. Two others fly above them.

Theo sets Mina down in front of the restaurant’s saloon doors. Some saboteur has rigged the digital thermometer to read 187 degrees.

“I’ll be back in a flash,” he says.

“What about my PJs?”

“No one will notice. Can you order us some coffee?”

“O-lay!” She pinches his sweaty nostrils. He squawks like a duck.

Half the time, she’s changing the wrong letters. That’s what her fake accent is all about: playing. She’s playing with language.

What if his role is something more than as a driver? What if there is something in this for him? If Mina, despite everything, can keep hold of something agile and luminous, then he can get out of the car and talk to Jared, can’t he?

He will kiss the line of Jo’s collarbone until she wakes.

But as he’s jogging towards the motel room, he hears Mina shout, “She’s already here! Mom’s already here!” Mina’s holding the door open. She seems concerned, not scared. “She won’t say anything.”

They enter the diner together. A gumball machine half-filled with plastic spider rings, an electronic oracle that spits out horoscopes on rose-colored scrolls. In the back, their suitcase lies open on the table of the clamshell booth where Jo sits. The suitcase blocks Jo’s face; Theo can see only an unbrushed fray of hair falling over one ear. The clothes and toiletries strewn, unfolded.

Theo nudges his daughter and says, “Go ask the nice waitress what’s yummy.”

The waitress stands behind the counter, anxious, her skin lit orange by the grill’s heat lamp. Mina climbs up onto the stool across from her. “Do you have strawberries?”

“Honey,” the waitress says, “we’re fresh out of strawberries. Let me tell you what we do have.”

Theo approaches Jo’s table. Her eyes vacant, her motions dull. Using the back of her spoon, she pokes at an ice cube in a glass of water. The ice cube bobs, resurfaces. She pokes at it again.

*

Theo has seen this look before. For Mina's eighth birthday party, he had hired a magician, a gawky 20-year old with fake, curling nails and an equally ridiculous Fu Manchu. As pièce de resistance, he wheeled out a primitive version of the slice-in-half trick, invited Mina to be his lovely assistant. Mina stepped into the black box. She was blushing. The guillotine plunged down, Mina's rhinestone shoes and pig tails flew in opposite directions. The other girls, disturbed and gullible, pressed their hands to their cheeks. Jo, standing close by, started to scream.

Theo was leaning against the barbecue on the other side of the swimming pool; he thought the kids would enjoy themselves more deeply if the adults kept their distance. It was a split-second decision, a bad one: perceiving it expedient to first remove the origin of the problem, Theo did not console Jo. Instead, he helped the magician wheel the guillotine away. That's when he noticed that Jo's initial, terrorized reaction had changed into this look of glazed withdrawal.

*

Stupid, stupid Theo. It wasn't, as he had assumed, the enactment of Mina's death that prompted Jo's mania, that prompted her to recode the combination to the garage door, to make quiet inquiries about Mina's male violin teacher. Not the imagined horror of Mina's decapitated head, but the hopelessness of abandonment. The vision of everyone leaving her, everyone leaving her after Jared's leaving.

The book he's reviewing, *The Dirty History of American Landfill*, lies face down under the next table. Conspicuously placed. He uses it to press down the overflowing contents of the suitcase.

Jo has made herself pretty. Smart, no-nonsense clothing; black knee-length shorts and a tight fitting orange tank top. She has applied pale red lipstick, acorn-colored stuff around her eyes. A delicate gold necklace around her slim, corded neck, and a crucifix, a gift from her terminally ill mother after Jo had spearheaded the movement to bring her home to die. It looked more like a Swiss Cross. Over 2000 years, Jo said, Christ's legs must have lengthened.

"Sorry," says Theo. He latches shut the suitcase, hoists it off the table. "Mina went walkabout."

"You knew exactly what you were doing, Theo."

It's so patronizing, the way she says his name. He slides into the booth. "I had to find her, didn't I?" he says. "I just hoped we'd get back before you woke. Really, the last thing I wanted to do is worry you."

"You want me on edge. The more erratic I get, the more reserved and orderly you act."

To hold Jo, to lean over and take her in his arms, that would be everything. He can't. Her body crackles, emanates heat. Her fingertips pruned with vertical lines, as if permanently underwater.

"Jo," he says, "We're here, right? Nothing happened to us. We're safe. Mina's safe."

"You think I don't know that? It's not about safety. If I knew why I've been acting like this, I wouldn't do it. I'm, I don't know, elsewhere, and so are you. Every damn minute, every damn day."

The waitress touches Mina's elbow. This startles Mina, who had been sitting by herself, her knees perched on the stool, fingering the scalloped covering to last night's pies: pecan and lime meringue.

"Coffee for my Mom and Dad," says Mina. She skips to the table. After a minute in which no one speaks, the waitress sets their coffee on the table, jots down their order, and goes back to the kitchen. Mina preoccupies herself with peeling open single-serving creamers and dumping them into their chipped I ♥ Death Valley mugs.

"And what is safe, anyways?" asks Jo. "If we were really safe, Jared would still be alive."

"And Mina wouldn't."

"Jesus, how can you say that in front of her?"

"She wasn't an accident," says Theo. "We don't love her less because Jared came first, do we?"

Jo rummages through her purse, finds Mina's portable DVD player. She untangles the headphones and puts them on Mina's head.

"I was thinking," says Theo, "we might be more of a family if we did something together."

Jo shakes her head. "It's too late," she says. She stirs her coffee, though the cream has already assimilated. The spoon jingles against the mug, and a few drops jump, flea-like, onto the laminate table. "I don't know how you've done it, and I certainly don't know how I've put up with it, but you've zeroed yourself out entirely."

Mina covers her headphones with her hands. She has cranked up the volume on her DVD. When mermaids die, she once told Theo, they turn into sea foam. A pacific image, sea foam dissipating over dark water.

*

Has Jo despised him ever since Mina's birth? Blamed him for not only the way they recreated themselves in the wake of Jared's death, but for his stoicism, his pragmatism, the solace of routines which protected them?

What he never told Jo: all those days that, on the surface, had held so much ease, so many simple pleasures, gave way to nights when Jared came back to him.

Squirrels scuttered across the telephone wires outside the bedroom window. Theo saw himself just before the accident, sitting with Jared in the car, in the back seat, playing Hi-Q. Jared, in thought, held his fist over his mouth, as if about to punch himself. Jo's hair flattened by the old car's headrest, her hand wrapped over the gearbox.

Moments later, in the middle of the road, wiping blood from Jared's mouth. Breathing into him. And breathing again.

Night after night, when Jo slept, when he couldn't, he visualized letters rolling in gold filament through the black behind his closed eyes: Lord, give me the courage to love my daughter as I loved my son.

So many things he hadn't allowed himself to consider. That maintaining a quarantine on grief came at a cost greater than his insomnia. That sacrificing exuberance for stability turned into mistaking serenity for exile. That trying to shelter Mina from their grief didn't shelter her in the least.

*

The sizzle of meat juice on the industrial griddle. The oracular, vaguely Persian song of the horoscope machine.

“You remember,” Theo says, “when Mina broke the frame of her sunglasses?”

Jo pulls one headphone off Mina’s head and says to her, “You’ll burn up your ears.” Mina turns down the volume.

“Mina was so upset,” Theo says. “They cost all of \$5.99, but she wouldn’t throw them away, even when the lenses kept falling out. So you gave Mina the Crazy Glue. You remember how tightly she held together the two parts of the frame? But no matter how hard she pressed the edges together, or for how long, the bond didn’t hold.”

“Can you cut the simile, or the metaphor, or whatever it is?”

“I was touching him when he died. Maybe I never let you see how my heart was broken. I never let myself say it. I thought that time itself would help us crazy glue our hearts back together.”

“That is crazy.”

“All the energy I put into taking care of you, into giving us stability, maybe that also took me away from myself. I want to change that. We should try. If we visit Jared together, really together, it might start something.”

“Maybe,” says Jo; she does touch his hand.

The waitress sets their food on the table. Mina cuts a forkful of chocolate pancakes and holds it in front of Theo’s face. “You should try them,” she says.

Theo takes the bite. “Incredibly delicious,” he says.

“What color were Jared’s eyes?” asks Jo.

“Why are you challenging me?”

“I need to know if you’re too far gone.”

“Blue,” says Theo. “His eyes were blue.”

Jo leans over Mina to hug Theo. Mina, smushed between them, dabs away Jo’s tears.

“Do you think we can make it by ten?” asks Jo.

“Sure,” he says. His voice is suddenly distant. He’s no longer hungry. He can’t smell the Tabasco, the eggs garnished with sliced Jalapeños. He crumbles the webby hash browns just to feel the warm grease on his fingertips.

Jo’s right. He’s been carved out, emptied by attrition. Grave digger, dumpster diver. Because he can’t remember if Jared’s eyes were sky blue or regal blue or slivered with grey. He sees only the smeared type on the death certificate. The written word, blue. Not the experience of looking into his son’s eyes, but the logical record of the experience.

Jo says: “You’re on the planet Pluto again.”

He replies: “Pluto’s not a planet any more.”

Mina has arranged three of the chocolate chips into two eyes and a nose. An upside-down slice of pineapple for the smile. Which she then inverts.

His bad memory depresses him, but it’s not unforgivable. He doesn’t expect his memory, years in drydock, to so quickly unbarnacle. He’s not too far gone, not if distance can be calculated by desire. That’s not why he’s morosely pushing the tines of his fork into his gums.

If going to the site was a bad idea ten years ago, now it’s simply dangerous. He’ll have to fake his emotion, fake his participation, and Jo and Mina will notice, which will generate resentment. More importantly, he has to protect Mina from being lowered into

Jared's orbit. Jared as stain on concrete, as dent in a metal divider, as ghost, as gift-giver, restless, waiting, useless. He must protect Mina from the illusion that the dead remain at the scene of the dying, waiting for the living to reappear so that they can give them some reassurance, some forgiveness, some trinket which will save them. Protect her from seeing the crash as the source of everything, investing her in a ritual of death and loss that simply looms over their mourning. As if covering landfill with pine-tree air fresheners, which themselves rust and rot. Hiding trash with trash.

"I changed my mind," he says to Jo. "We can't go." Despite the fact that he speaks from conviction rather than from shock, he knows that it comes out the same: terrible, cowardly, malicious interference. "Trust me, Jo: it will destroy us."

Jo looks at her watch. "Seven minutes!" Pink filaments of grapefruit between her teeth. "Seven minutes for you to change your mind, that's a record."

"We put our grief in a box, can't you see? Once a year, you take Jared out, and then you lock him away again."

"Your alternative is what? To pretend that nothing ever happened?"

"If we take Mina there," he says, setting the car keys softly in her hand, "she'll always be our replacement child."

Mina takes off her headphones and says: "Mom doesn't know how to drive!"

She has been listening. Precious, precocious.

"If we don't," says Jo, "she won't know who we are."

"She doesn't know who we are now. She knows the shell of us. She only knows our survival strategies."

"Please come," Jo says. "It's like you said, we can be there together. Please."

Theo shakes his head. “I love you. I am fully committed to you, to me, to starting to talk through, to feel everything we’ve been through. But all this pilgrimage does is bleed us.”

He tries to kiss Jo on the lips. She turns her head away.

On the way out, Theo buys not simply a Jawbreaker, but a Jawbreaker Mega Bruiser. He sits on a bench in the sun, enjoys the scald rising through the metal. The sky is shot through with funnel-shaped clouds. The Jawbreaker is gold, drip-painted with red and blue, sweating and lacquered. He pops it into his mouth. It hurts his jaw to chew, and it’s so fakely sweet.

It’s been a few minutes; Jo has not come out. She might divorce him; he had never considered the possibility. He clasps his hands behind his neck; the thin black hairs below his hairline have already moistened. On his arms, goose bumps from the temperature shift. The door to the diner swings open. Out steps Mina, her pajama legs dusty below the knee, who gives him his half-eaten sausage, the end tied off like an umbilical cord.

“Thank you,” he says, popping the sausage into his mouth.

“Mom wants you to come back in.”

“You’re smarter than all of us,” he says to Mina, kissing her forehead, “you know that?”

“Are we going to visit Jared?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “Jared’s grave is in Upland. Do you want to see him there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay,” says Theo. He kisses her forehead again. “Tell Mom I’ll be there in a minute.”

Maybe there is nothing left of him. Maybe he’s scared, unwilling to change, unwilling to admit that the site can restore him. Like going into a sulfur spring wearing an astronaut suit. Or maybe he should give in, go to the mile marker, pretend that the ritual offers something more than the mirage of healing. He won’t give in; he will not go back. The ways they have adjusted to Jared’s death have not washed away his dissociations, her hysteria, their house of cards.

He will go back into the diner, and he will try to reason with Jo if she still insists on going. He will bring their suitcase to the car, scratch the one-day visitor pass from the bottom-left corner of the windshield. One way or another, he will drive his family home, leave this landscape littered with brilliance and bone. The upended, striping diagonal of the foothills, rose quartz and washed tourmaline. The creosote bushes that maintain harmonious spacing by virtue of a poison secreted underground. The pupfish that swims in water six times more salinate than the ocean. Highly adaptive creatures who have, over time, learned how to thrive in inhospitable conditions.

MERMAID ANATOMY

That first night Lena brought us to the ship.

A ship that in 1860 ran aground keeling sideways on the mossy rocks.

Long before someone named this beach Ocean Beach.

Over time passing wave and storm buried the ship veiling it of what history it had.

Infrequent low tide years allowed the mast to breach its spindrift and very rarely
as now could Benny and I enter through a gaping crack in the hull.

The ship unentombed unlike the cretaceously ambered bugs Lena wore on long
chains around her neck.

When we arrived Lena and Benny and me hopped crab-legged off her scooter
Lena explaining how the locals pillaged the manifest. Violating the Chinese girls on the
wet sand letting the indentured slaves drown handcuffed in the hold.

Lena with the body of a boy kicked at the remains of a bonfire her skinny high-
collared dress rippling like a red checkered tablecloth in the wind.

Her boot whispered everything to ash.

She blew on her fingertips saying to me *Flowers don't smell underwater*. Saying
And to think that four hundred years ago you owned the best part of this country.

Meaning the Dutch bought New York for 20 US dollars siphoning it to the British
for Surinam and an East Indies island silted with nutmeg.

We hoarded saffron dispersed salt huddling safe on our typhoid-scented marshes.

I vacationed in San Francisco friendless because on a beaten familiar path I knew as always shiny things with their unique qualities would seem equal and dull and crows with oily talons would sit overlording my eyelids.

Lena said *The object lies somewhere in the ship.*

Why don't you get it yourself?

I present you with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit and you choose the garbage disposal unit.

Her voice sounded like right angles.

Though soft like the felt that protects the corners of picture frames.

What does that mean? I asked.

It means don't choose the door hiding the Bolivian Llama said Benny.

Taking off his orchid-print shirt Benny with headphones blasting Don Ho said *It means just do it fuckface.* On his sallow back a tattoo of Godzilla and King Kong on the Empire State Building unaware how behind them faster than gravity Fay Wray was falling.

July blistered its *windkracht* bitter on the beach me having a memory of me at sixteen in panic interpreting my goose bumps as gonorrhea. Disease spreading an inflamed pink wave over my forearms. That summer in Italy with my grandparents my grandfather had apnea snoring as if meanly drunk me sleeping alone on a tarp under the trailer.

My *oma* each night before bed double-checking the emergency brake.

Lena sat crosslegged on the sand inside a dead campfire hanging a patinaed stopwatch letting it twist on its chain over a notebook me imagining Vulcan lonely and molten with his forge numbering the souls his labors would kill.

Having studied mythology the sideways lineage of deity and demi-deity I had no idea then how I had gotten the wrong god.

Benny might not recognize the object Lena said to me. *Only you can recognize the object.*

The maw in the ship's hull frightened me nightmaring fishless holes in blue ice. My so-called parents having died when I was seven skating a *sluis* swallowed down through the calving ice.

Apparently half-submerged near the hole was an upside-down Christmas tree.

And a laundry basket.

So I couldn't bear to look at the ship.

Blinking lights of offshore oil tankers anchored for the night bobbed and blanked out on kilometers of waves.

The clouds an occlusion of sky.

Next to a shattered piece of driftwood a doubloon found me. On closer look it was a gear-shaped game token from a place called Chuck E. Cheese.

Lena launched at me a paper airplane that veered nowhere near. *Get me the object* she said *I must touch the object.*

Her need absolute and compelling as the hum of electric wires on hackle nights when everyone save the sleepwalkers dreams shallow.

Remembering the hostel this morning when I first met Lena replacing in my hands my well-studied map with a map of Communist Prague. Saying *how tragic to find exactly what I expected to find.*

Let Lena be the map I told myself. As if from a riptide I pulled back the storky ankles of my fear.

Straddling the prow on lookout for intruders cops or as he said *scuttlebags* Benny set his headphones on the deck. The strum of ukelele distorted against the warped old planks. He jumped through the broken hull and down helping my descent by grabbing my waist roughly or else blackly unbalanced I would have fallen.

The hull made timber-cracking noises reorganizing itself around us. It churned of rot and dead air you had to suck hard into your lungs and the moist wood smelled of every pocket knife incising initials on the rare available years.

The most efficient thing to do I said *is make a grid.*

Hey fuckface who crowned you Emperor?

In Holland instead of fuckface we said *kankerlul* which meant cancer dick.

If you stood on the Berkeley campus said Benny flicking at a lighter until it sparked *the Korean girl moonies would swarm all over you.*

Don't cheat! yelled Lena.

It was an accident said Benny. The way his tongue curled down his lie made me taste how unrequited he loved her.

Light might help I said to Lena.

Psychogeography she replied *depends on experimentation by means of concrete interventions in urbanism. Think sailors snorting nutmeg across the equator think the*

filing of eyeteeth think firewalking. This applies equally to the gourd of flesh you call home.

I lurched a step in the black hull seeing me not long after my parents died me walking down *Haarlemmerstraat* my eyes closed daring myself to walk one two three more steps blind to trust the universe not to shoot out a car crushing my pelvis each time too soon opening my eyes or now with my eyes open seeing nothing.

Why I enjoyed making love wearing earplugs.

Seriously I asked Lena *what's so important about this object?*

With one more question she warned I'd be reduced to buying sets of lacquered chopsticks my vacation doomed to febrility. Eating wrong-monthed shellfish on Fisherman's Wharf.

I'm going to etch a sketch now she said.

Grudgingly Benny agreed that so as not to unwittingly destroy the object we would inch our way crawling slowly in the claustrophobic dank from center to corners.

I wanted a *zeer oude Jenever* any antediluvial brown liquid that scalded down the throat.

My ears hurt from the whisk-whisk of Benny's hand sweeping the floor.

Ouch! he yelled *splinters!*

Benny are you okay?

Don't call me that fuckface.

Apparently his real name was James but Lena called him Benny in tribute to the recently deceased Rocky Aoki glorious spiritual leader of the Benihana restaurant chain.

Then why do you let her call you that? I asked.

You make a name sound like it contains every crust of you.

Our knees clomp-clomping the wood here in the hold with the ghosts of slaves.

I found something! I yelled. Something metallic shaped like a nutcracker.

Handing it up to Lena the distant halogen of the city explained me that it was severed from its cable a spring-loaded V-shaped clamp designed to charge car batteries.

I pulled myself up and Lena said *Not so fast* pressing hard into my forehead the ink tip of her pen *there's another object down there.*

What sense does it make I said *for you to hide objects for others to find to return to you.*

Lena walking back towards the water clapping happily her fingerless mint-green mittens.

The tetanus is coursing up my limbs said Benny. *If Lena set another object let's get to it.*

After five or fifty minutes of us trawling this second object Benny found what his hands felt was a bowl full of something crumbled. *Like a dog biscuit after the termites* he said.

Immediately I heaved myself up into the ocean air. Close by the ship stood a guy hunched over against the wind hoodie closed over his face and protective of Lena whom I didn't see I drove him off limping into the switchgrass.

Headlights in dotted spray through the dunes.

Benny held a ceramic dish with one fortune cookie in a bed of crushed fortune cookies.

Seemingly unburdened by the object cupping the intact fortune cookie in his two hands delicate as if a holy thumbnail-sized frog.

I asked where Lena was and Benny said *Those who know don't tell.*

So you don't know I said.

Willing Benny to open the fortune cookie because my *oma* who divined the future from bird scratchings in the gravel of bocce parks said man-made fortunes bestowed bad luck. He did read the fortune but was not as I anticipated immaculately fucked by lightning.

A Twix wrapper and tumbleweeds of crumpled paper dead in the ashes of campfire.

Crumpled paper had in my life always meant heartache.

I unwrinkled page after page on which inside diamond-shaped kites Lena had drawn a Mermaid with scaly grotesque flippers severed from the torso serrated in its unconjoining.

What's her story? I asked Benny. *She practically vibrates.*

As if I'm going to puncture her with language.

Fine let's share a taxi.

If we tried to hail a cab on Great Junction Highway at this time of night said Benny picking up his shirt and headphones *we'd be mistaken for male hustlers.*

I followed Benny at a two block distance curious about the stencil graffiti on each street corner of Galaxians who paternally ensured that the stencils of fluked whales didn't slip into the sewer draining into the bay.

Fog dissipating a hand's length over our heads.

Ascending the avenues and into Japantown where Benny closed an iron-barred door on me near an all-night Denny's where at 6:00 am I ate a Hawaiian grand slam breakfast with an ice-cream scooper half-sun of melting butter.

Licking the syrup off my fingers wondering what discolored planet Lena sprang from.

Lena who crumpled kites and broken mermaids and hid fortune cookies perhaps orchestrating some inarticulate salvation and in the glottal flap of her throat that stopped speech I recognized something of myself.

Overtipping a young waitress with bone-white dreadlocks whose nametag read *Velveeta*.

Then slotting in a quarter to fight muscular dystrophy.

As Lena had insisted on wandering via algorithm generating *transient passage through varied ambiances* I started down Post Street resolving to enter the sixth open door which an hour after sunrise was an *Introduction to Aikido* class.

His foot stomping down the thick blue mat the sensei hooked his student under the neck nearly decapitating him. Never learning how to defend myself I watched raptly how unmovingly I sat not sounding the creaky metal chair.

Outside in the diffuse cold sun despite the pesticidal dew I lay down on a patch of grass.

Normally I slept twelve or fourteen hours a night but the mapless insomniac energy of Lena's west coast flooded me ecstatic emptying me well beyond the language of revelation and for some reason intensely scared of myself.

*

Just 20 hours ago I had arrived exhausted at the hostel where dropping my bags on the swept floor I heard the woman I now know as Lena explaining Benny that revolution was an improbable calculus of infinite subtle shifts in environmental atmospheres.

Frustrated she asked him *If you can't get that can you at least get me a peach smoothie?*

And a Twix.

Benny returned minutes later replying *They only have King Sized d'you still want it?*

Over her math-rimmed glasses Lena peered down at me saying *Only a homunculus could be fooled by questions of scale.*

Around her neck a silvery cricket made of smooth silken pebbles glued together like blobs of mercury.

2 am she said *Debord and Benny and I will be revving up for you.*

Later learning that Debord was the name of her scooter.

She left not waiting for Twix or smoothie which I drank after Benny with tennis shoes sparkly as disco balls looked everywhere for her and disappointedly left.

At first I forgot about Lena but after a day of block-legged dreariness at the Farmers' Market my cheeks wet from the juice of two-dollar pears watching pantomimes in Aztec plumage I as always critical of myself said *Doe je normaal asshole ben je gek genoeg.*

Act normal that's crazy enough.

So many years my friends and I followed script camping at Yellowstone hammering tent pegs with rocks purified by the vast Texan sky battered by hail on the Dakotan plains returning to Rijswijk wearing ten-gallon hats riding our bicycles through the needle-cold rain.

In my unsloughed tiredness I grew tired of our wildness cordoned.

And my *oma* who like puttying the holes in a smoker's tarry lung made me a *hagelslag* sandwich on a Delft plate before revealing that my dead parents were not even my real parents.

Adopted abandoned storyless to a bundle of reeds along the riverbank.

My childhood full of badly colored crumpled up connect-the-dots of giraffes and woodpeckers and *oma* showing me a waste bin full of paper balls enumerating the times she tried to tell me.

Though I imagined Lena in her brackish demeanor as a fake fireplace giving off no heat I had some want of her warmth her freckles as tiny hot coals in my hands.

At worst I told myself dressing at 1:45 am I would meet a different murder of crows.

*

Now arriving back at the hostel I expected Lena with scalene impulses waiting for me with battery clamp in mittened hand and explanation to part the beaded curtain of my half-consciousness but instead all the backpackers were blending their unique granola concoctions plotting against the ennui of their beatnik days.

Some people were driving to Mystery Spot where the laws of gravity didn't exist where billiard balls rolled uphill. One person inquiring for work received a generous offer from a made-to-order dildo boutique.

If dreams of molds of teeth meant the same thing as dreams of teeth.

How Lena's eyes gigantic and dilated as if blind until that moment taking the object from me through the cracked hull.

Remembering dimly that to save the mermaid from seafoam I must recognize her as the creature who saved me from the shipwreck.

Me dreaming me as her first vision.

All day I didn't brush my teeth or go to my room staying in the common area in awkward recline on the Thai silk couch watching for Lena.

The untethering weightlessness and wind of the kite ballasted by the mutilation of flippers. Scales of waxen wings melting freefall the inconsequent splash in the sunstruck sea.

Whatever this potential delivery into calm lit as a Christmas tree the brachii of my lungs. Everything glossy traveled quickly through air and each time I told myself I was happy I became a little more happy.

For eating a ham and butter sandwich with a knife and a fork other backpackers jokingly teased me which made me feel a part of something. Proud for exceeding the orbital pull of my quiet I struck up an chat with the lambchopped smoothie maker who explained why gunfights in graveyards in Western movies were rarely conclusive.

Sadly by nightfall my mind started inuring itself to the flat reassembly of my initial plans.

The number 14 bus route to The Mission where I would eat a Nicaraguan breakfast of frijoles negros crema y platanos.

Waking up at 4:30 grinding my teeth horribly I had forgotten to put in my mouthguard.

Miserably unable to see Lena as the antidote to my eyes.

All these homeless symbols.

Two nights without her I proved myself taking different routes through the city. Based on the first letter of each ingredient in a Twix Bar correlative to Tenderloin street names. Counting the blinks of eyes I determined lefts and rights funneling up to a signless place locals called No Name Zushi where they sold fugu made from textured vegetable protein.

Hopefully removing the fake poison.

Even wearing neon orange earplugs my cochlea irradiated and dissolved again and again listening to a Japanese noise band made up of voice guitar drums and vacuum cleaner.

Reminding me of *oma* who as part of a radical socialist group stole all the fire extinguishers prior to tossing Molotovs into reactionary movie theaters. Who on days when I felt imprisoned by the imaginary hospital bars of my small bedroom cot would tap tap tap on my temples in morse code.

By candlelight drunk in the hostel a woman with a pierced cheek told me how last summer by moonlight she got paid to pick the slugs off the organic crops killing them into a bucket of salt water. Unable to implement such fluid genocide she dropped the

living slugs at the property's edge thus keeping her in work since the slugs each night returned.

It would have been a *makkie* to mate with her but for fear of Lena's visitation.

Without Lena I grew increasingly weighted and lardish.

Nutter Butters glommed to the tongue tasting like wet clay.

The next two days I hardly left my room thinking of Dean Moriarty's boxcar binges and Allan Ginsberg's beard littered with pasta scraps and eraser shavings. Early the third morning I drank in dark bars with tight steep steps to basement bathrooms with saloon door stalls and whiskeys later in bright light I came out squinting to life itself finding myself in Japantown.

Sitting on a bench in front of Benny's front door unable to move I read the newspaper inking out another suicide off the Golden Gate Bridge where girls broken-backed by the fall relinquished themselves to the cold fast current swifting them out to sea.

Certain now that the mermaid in all her girlish desire represented some traumatic degraded time Lena's legs unlike the battery clamp unopened.

In order to truly desire a mermaid flippering green and kelpy you had to force yourself to forget she had no vagina.

Despondent I prayed for an earthquake to uncommit me through a crack in the floor.

The night before my flight I lost the hostel's corkscrew estimating if I broke the bottle how much cheap Chilean wine would I lose how much glass my stomach could grind down.

Sniffing my armpits acrid of iron I managed to sludge myself to the corner store. There I saw someone shoplift a mirror and nail polish remover and me envious of the waterfall of shame or any strong emotion in which the thief would later bathe.

When I returned Lena with her rust-colored hair was leaning one-thighed on a fire hydrant blowing the sweet exhale of a candy cigarette up into the descending sky.

*

Each time Debord the scooter hit a pothole Lena's wings of scapulae sharpened and I tightened my stomach so as not to lurch forwards concussing my head against her helmet. Between us on the rubber floorboards patterned with a Maori tattoo sat a purple-strapped duffelbag its logo of silvery winged shoes.

This immovable space between us like sixth graders slow dancing.

My fake mom riding me on the back of her *omafiets* touching my hand so I could hold tighter before crossing the tram tracks at the entrance to *Rembrandtpark*. Us plugging our noses passing the Renault garage.

At a red light I asked Lena *Did Benny give you the bowl of fortune cookies?*

Lena lifted her fiberglass facemask saying *I didn't leave any fortune cookies.*

A crescent of militia blackout under each eye.

The Nexus Six replicant Rutger Hauer who's Dutch said to the scientist who created him *If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes.*

If mermaids saw color in abyss where the pressure can crush a combination safe.

You just went home without us? I asked.

Sorry I've lost my tongue.

Lena went through the light before it greened. A nursery that sold palm trees inside terracotta pots reminded me of Chinese warriors readying for battle in great lines through the great lonely weeds. Warriors the unburnt brown of the single gingerbread cookie *oma* rationed to me each day after school.

Scarcity and restraint declared sacred in Holland as a blank church wall.

The parking lot we pulled into jutted out over the bay renovated lofts to the left a road to the right a tall fence in front locking us from a small park. Broken glass bottles concreted into the top of the fence warding off pigeons unzipped lovers and saboteurs.

The peaceful gauze of the scooter's motor winding down allowed me to ask Lena
Is Benny meeting us?

With her unhelmeting came the smell of salt as if sea water evaporated on her skin.

Silence is an elephant she said putting her finger over her lips.

Undoubtedly the entire area mounded from landfill.

Having upturned our country from loam we Dutch carried in our hearts a soft spot for building something out of nothing trenching mud from the underbelly of the sea.

What did it mean to have a soft spot in your heart?

Some said a glass of red wine first thing in the morning killed the worms in your heart.

Some said Amsterdam was founded at the coordinates of a dog's sick.

Unsurprisingly there stood a statue of a mermaid on a matte silver pedestal. Some replica of the original Little Mermaid which I saw in Copenhagen near a hippie commune converted from a military base. The mermaid in Copenhagen fronting the placid harbor

the stunning white wind generators across the bay in Malmo like giant mixers slicing up the sky and Greenlandic Eskimos slumming down the nearby housing projects.

Sure now that Lena's stories culminated here under the polyp eye of the mermaid.

Something queasily sexual on the slatted park bench or in the clawfoot bathtub used as a planter for white lilies and the mermaid with her serpentine hair covering each unsculpted nipple.

From the duffelbag Lena handed me a plastic pouch and the trident-pronged end of a long power cord. *The outlet's there* she said showing me the plug on the nearest loft *disable the camera first.*

I guess we're doing something illegal.

You know what's illegal? her voice unhoarse unscratchy unrolling a set of lock-picking tools from an oilcloth. *The blatant disruption of local psychogeography the unforgivable obstruction of the dérive the inhumane powers that satisfy oppression in a given environment.*

So we're doing something illegal I said drawing out lengths of cable.

Me glittering to accelerate for Lena some psychic aperture through the collision of fat sluggish molecules.

I resolved not to beg for past or future not to scavenge for her story.

Lena whispering into the hole of the lock.

On a brick ledge under the camera eye I saw that the plastic pouch Lena gave me was filled with a gum called BIG LEAGUE CHEW.

Pink with white powder burns compressed in short strands like orphaned DNA like uncooked hamburger meat.

A spoiled low-tinted Honda drove sudden down the street froze me lengthened me in light and I ground down my teeth.

Stretching I held the stem of the camera in one hand pushing the gum so it spread over the lens making us divinely invisible. Then wiping off my fingerprints removing the trace of me.

The cable plug entering the socket let through a lucky warm white spark.

Upon skipping back to Lena who had long since picked the lock who pointing ruefully said *It's so oppressively leaden here see how it gathers around her head?*

I tried to fathom a lead halo which didn't reveal itself.

Down the coast at the baseball stadium seagulls flew figure eights mini-eclipses fronting the banks of fluorescent lights. Me remembering one summer in Venice with *oma* and *opa* seagulls at night winging like this above a backlit colonnade. My grandfather charmingly failing to father me trying over pasta made black with squid ink to span the gaps of dark matter in my lineage said that as the seagulls mistook the bright light for daylight they never slept and driven crazy would die forever driven towards it.

It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw and the saddest thing I ever saw.

Lena had set a chainsaw on the moist soil strung out with violets and now drew a line of air from it to the mermaid's neck.

I picked it up let my fingers run over the saw teeth like a child's drawing of waves desperate for Lena to chip her story back into meaningless discrete chunks and yet uneasy craving its opposite.

Lena so far past her own powers she couldn't decapitate the mermaid herself requiring me as henchman as ritual sacrifice to the mermaid king who demands for his

daughters men bloating charmingly face down in the sea or as ravager destroyer to lay waste to what?

I pulled the chain the blinding noise the wisp the pluming smoke. Unable to gaze at the mermaid as I cut. Dagging chips of marble.

For Lena's ragged nails to stopper my withered ears.

Despite the shriek of noise in love with noise until the spark and grind of the saw momentarily stuck on the steel spinal column.

Finally the head plunked into the soil Lena let out a whoop again belying her tonguelessness. Making swimming motions with her arms parting the air as if its very consistency lightened before her and in her I saw the arrhythmic line of my lost days no longer lashed to me and the box of atrophy I had long secured around me in freefall like an open-walled construction elevator whose cable had been cut.

I took up the head indeed silver and heavy in my shuddering arms offering it up apotropaic to Lena positive she would throw the head into the water as humans having felt the mermaid's abjection must shunt her back to the sea.

If mermaids could return from land to conch underwater sounds beyond the frequency of human ears they would absolve our constraints.

Lena though looked pale and petrified. A charm of a praying mantis dangled the shadow of a scar in the hollow between her keybones. She started walking to her scooter and I ran after her lapsing into Dutch saying *Godverdomme* saying *Don't you want it?*

She put her hand hard against my chest me staggering backwards.

Jinx's palm! she yelled. *You must remain immobile!*

What happened to you here?

For the first and only time I saw her smile her crimped smile.

Don't look between the legs of women she said walking away *you'll turn to stone.*

Did she think I was imagining the shape of her body in her clothes nothing like the shape of her body?

Speeding the scooter almost flew into the water before Lena angled it away.

A light came on in a loft supposedly the artists there bred from recycled steel colossal articulated scorpions breathing fire into the cadmium night.

Walking home I hid the head under my shirt like a baby knowing I had gotten not simply the wrong god but the wrong mythology not mermaid but medusa.

Slitty harsh steel welts on my stomach.

So I retraced my steps back to the park stuffing the head into the duffel bag with its silvery wings slinging the bag over my shoulder.

Furthering myself from the water the mermaid's head grew shrunken and less meaningful.

From an all-night Indian convenience store selling frozen goat cubes I bought for *oma* and *opa* candied almonds and keychains of Alcatraz.

Searching for change in my shirt pocket my hand haunted by the repulsing souvenir of Lena's repelling hand.

I left the mermaid in an alley where the still night air got small where I could hear every single cooling unit in the city condensing where pools of oily standing water shimmered but to my relief chose not my flickering phosphenic vision to reflect.

K/S

Dizzy peels back the shoulder of his angora sweater, revealing a red-purple patch of skin to RJ, who is sipping the last of his Coke from an Arby's cup. ---*Media's viral darling*, quips Dizzy, *in the flesh!* It's 1993. This year's signifiers: the lesion, a sand-haired boy begging research money from Congress. In the boy's suit pocket, a small plastic monkey; an anti-anxiety charm. Dizzy calls this first one his imaginary friend. No better evidence of bodily decomposition, ethical turpitude. Scored like a sewer grate, like a barbecue burn, open as a mouth. ---*I'm like so papular!* he says. Valley-girl style. RJ listens to himself sucking up air with a straw. Even a closed-mouth smile would humor Dizzy, to show shock would be to harden what need not calcify. Dizzy's been asymptomatic for a long time. The straw hits an ice cube and RJ thinks the word *calving* and Dizzy laughs though the joke has long since trailed away.

A few days later, with the first still in what Dizzy calls royal thrush, the second appears. Dizzy draws a five-pointed star around it. To prove his good health, he touches his toes, calls Sevil to schedule his weekly Turkish lesson. Once there, he makes her teach him nothing but spices. As RJ prepares for a "anti-date" with Misa – carefully guiding the razor around his short sideburns - Dizzy cuts bandaids into strips, applies them like jail bars to the sarcoma. ---*What are you doing?* asks RJ. ---*If one gets in your liver*, replies Dizzy, *it probably is colorless, don't you think?* ---*I think tomorrow I'll make us*

pancakes. ---Like you're coming home tonight. ---Of course I'm coming home. That's RJ's plan, to stay close. ---You're never coming home, you breeder, says Dizzy, I see nothing in your future but the doggie stage. Watching Dizzy trace the lesion's scabby ridges, RJ says: ---You know, we still have blueberries. ---Excuse me, I'm reviewing now. The word for thyme is kekik. Cardamon is kakule. ---We're lucky, it's so late in the season. Dizzy yells: ---Can you stop making everything all nice-nice? RJ flops belly-down onto the bed. ---Whatever, he says. His fingernails need trimming.

---I'll tell you a story, RJ says the following evening, after Dizzy comes home, tipsy and self-satisfied, having seduced a boy with fragile wrists at a black-lit bar. Aside from a compulsory hug that morning, RJ and Dizzy have not spoken. What to say? Only that the world is big. ---K/S, begins RJ, stands for Kirk/Spock. ---What about them? ---They're gay. ---Cool, says Dizzy. The apartment smells of microwaved popcorn. While Dizzy gathers up the few remaining kernels from the blown-open bag, RJ describes the illegal underground novels that elaborate juicily upon Kirk and Spock's love affair. ---Do you remember the one with the deadly flying amoebae? asks Dizzy. They look like my imaginary friends here. He taps his shoulder. And equally evil. ---Not evil, says RJ. Just desperate. Kirk and Spock couldn't figure out that they were starving.

RELEASE

I'm trapped in the middle seat of this middle-aged plane painted to resemble Shamu the killer whale, popping honeyed peanuts into my mouth and contemplating the social significance of zombies. Specifically, I'm breaking down the epic George A. Romero tetralogy; *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, and *Land of the Dead*. Next week I'm presenting a Zombie for Dummies lecture to freshman film students. In preparation, I'm jotting down bullet points on the drink napkin: *they feed on brains, they enjoy spectacular fireworks, they are drawn to the mall because it was an important place to them*. It's not easy to dumb zombies down, but I must admit that I welcome the challenge, a few minutes to gather my thoughts before I see Grandma, barely alive, downgraded to a bleached cotton slip and a diet of Chinese chicken salad. She has been hanging on for three days now, waiting for me to bless her leave.

*

When I was admitted to Berkeley, her rouged cheeks brightened clown-pink with pride, and I glowed at her glowing. She gifted me a super-tech telephone, a phone-answering machine combo that actually spoke. *You have---TWO---new messages*. I programmed her onto the first speed-dial and rang her every Sunday after *Face the Nation*, we gabbed about how her teacher's pension bought her a new cherry-red Thunderbird. One week the phone went kaput, neither power nor dial tone. Illogical, I write on the napkin, that despite their doltishness, zombies manage to cut electricity to the houses they besiege. I

didn't want Grandma to think I was careless with her offerings so I wrote an outraged note, express-mailed the phone back to the factory. A month later, I received an unmarked box, the phone sheathed in plastic and ammonia sanitized, and a form letter that said *We regret the fact that this Panasonic warranty does not cover: INFESTATION*. The single word rubber-stamped in red ink. I was living in an anarchist collective, my black-walled room one floor above the vegan kitchen. Naturally I had read Gramsci and was dubious of corporate anything, so I unscrewed the phone's back panel. In the innards I found four perfectly preserved cockroach exoskeletons. Their wings veined, diaphanous, drawn to the hearth of the motor. I excised the tape mechanism and hung it in the collective art gallery, kept the manual and continued to regale Grandma with its preposterous features. I couldn't bear to tell her that her gift had failed me.

*

My stomach has plummeted, we've started our descent, and I will not fail her. She will be lying slack and unconscious under a painting of a woman whose bare skin is the blue of deep sea water. Nonetheless, she will recognize my presence from the particles of dust that orbit slowly around her. Then she will let go and there will be an epiphany of light, the illumination of a suburban house already preparing for her passing, the making museum of spare bedrooms, these rooms which in zombie movies turn into barricaded fortresses, wardrobes shoved up against doors. When you study zombies, you almost never get laid. At dinner parties, I'd unpack *the Marxist implications of the dead's leaderless army*. Tipsily I'd sidle up to cute girls and tell them about my dissertation, the snappily titled *Zombie Renaissance: Divining Intestines in a Post-Capital Dystopia*. It functioned poorly as an icebreaker, the girls more amused than beguiled. I considered a

topic shift to vampires but quickly grew bored with the overwrought perfection of immortality. Vampire punctures delicate, their iconography ornate. As if zombies were some kind of home, I came back to their call. I was fascinated by them. In the pantheon of the undead, only zombies give uncensored insight into the transitional space between life, death, and rebirth. Even if you're lucky enough to watch someone die, the life cycle is all hacked up, an arrowhead more than a circle. If you're not as fortunate, if your twin brother Andy had spent fourteen years in a coma, and you hadn't seen him once since you felt him go stale in your arms, and if your parents didn't tell you he had finally died until two weeks after, then natural conceptions of growth and decay are even more hopelessly fragmented. It's a miracle I don't compensate by breeding indiscriminately. In contrast, when humans are infected by zombies, you're afforded the precious opportunity to witness their return. Their eyeball may be uncoiled and boinging upside the socket, so what? You can still be liberated simply by witnessing this uninterrupted sequence.

Inexorably, death leads to the zombie's tottering next step, that's why born-again hate zombies. Because they chew at the barbed wire dividing life and death. Like the trailer says, *when there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth*. My ears just popped, the sorority girl in the Cal sweatshirt is folding a stick of Juicy Fruit into her mouth, does she offer me one? Like I said, there's no love for our kind, probably because I have slipped her drink napkin out from under her orange juice and scrawled: *Every dead body that is not exterminated becomes one of them! It gets up and kills! The people it kills get up and kill!* The ink on the napkin overlays a map of America, the arc of flight routes looks like the migration of a virus, and the body cannot, not without help, sever itself from the brain. Hang on, Grams, hang on.

*

Unseen peril in the dark, the flying coffin nearly clipping the canine peaks of the Tehachapis. Though undoubtedly he will not come to the airport, I am descending dangerously close to my father. He who couldn't possibly seek shelter further from his heart, he who tallies one son dead and the other estranged. Here's our average convo: *Hi*, I say, *it's me*. He says, *I'll get your mother*. I last saw him three years ago, at Andy's funeral; we had just turned twenty. It was a blistering and blue-skied morning, a magnificent brightness that unnerved me the same way that people visit Auschwitz with the expectation of thunderstorms. Instead they feel warm sun on their skin, daffodil fluff floating pacific around them, and they interpret their discomfort as survivor's guilt. There should really be a movie about Holocaust victims who return as zombies to wreak revenge on the Reich. If there's a movie called *Zombie Ninja Gangbangers*, then anything is possible. Before the funeral even started, Andy's nurses, stumpy women with glinty crosses and Kmart smocks, were weeping in the back row like a goddamned Greek chorus. They pissed me off for three reasons. One, they wailed like they knew him more intimately than I did. Two, they did. And three, they were sanding down my extreme resolve not to cry. I didn't want to cry because Mom had been crying ever since Andy's accident, as if his coma had dammed up her life and all that could sneak through was this crack, this leak of tears. Besides, it was completely ridiculous, having a funeral for someone so long on life support, not to blaspheme but he'd been dead for a while. I was dissociating once again on Dad's untucked shirt and Grandma's manicured nails. She sat next to me, dressed in silk and silver pearls; a Bette Davis, black widow kind of look. During the service she whimpered in an overly dramatic way that I couldn't really

fathom. I patted her hand. This, of all things, interrupted Mom's crying enough to provoke a mean, disbelieving stare that I didn't understand either. The bitter and the despondent at war in Mom's smeary, large-pored face. I was rooting for the bitter. Wrath, if all went well, might move something. I adjusted my tortoise shell glasses. Rabbi Frehling was finishing off the Kaddish, *aleynu v'al kohl yisrael v'eimru Amen*. Grandma stood up, her calves buckled, it didn't surprise me that she crumpled to the immaculate grass. Dad had prepped me with smelling salts and I snapped them under her nostrils. He towered over her, disgust seeping out of him like garlic, Grandma in involuntary, quivering reflex. Then she came to. *Where am I, where am I?* Dad was yelling, *you won't be satisfied unless you're the star!* I helped Grandma to her feet, focused on the gleaming brass drawer handles in the wall crypts that backdropped the funeral. I unrecline my airplane seat and wonder exactly how zombies break out of wall crypts. Are there catches on the inside, like the anti-kidnapping latches in the trunks of new cars, or can zombies bust out of them like Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill II*? By this time Dad had disappeared behind the acacia gardens to let off steam and Mom had with an unforgiving hand led Grandma away and everyone else had trudged sadly to their sedans, it was just me and Andy and the groundskeeper collapsing chairs. I walked over to Andy's coffin, my clip-on tie weighted down with sweat. *This is going to have to pass for goodbye*, I said, running my hand along the unfinished pine coffin. My fingers gathering splinters. I apologized for not saving him, for not watching him grow up, for not being at his deathbed. A blinking red light in peripheral vision; Dad's fancy video camera taping his own son's funeral. It's then that I started to cry. I despised his patchy stubble, the stains under his armpits. Shame, pathetic and muddy brown, because our arsenal against grief

was so paltry, the sunglasses and the camera and the pine box between my twin and his suitors. The groundskeeper coughed. I went and pocketed the videotape, the groundskeeper rolled Andy towards the mausoleum, the stewardesses are strapping themselves backwards into their chairs. Electronic devices should, by force if necessary, be switched off.

*

Sure enough, only one parent picks me up at the airport. Mom doesn't pull out from the parking spot until I fasten my seatbelt, safety being Mom's number one priority. That's why we drive to Grandma's house in a baby blue Volvo. Every so often, when Mom's not glancing fretfully into the rear view mirror, she shifts her eyes my way, probably to see if I've lost weight, her brittle lashes blinking and blinking. She doesn't speak, I don't help her out. My hands are clutched in my lap, the uneasy silence preferable to a chuckling assessment of Grandma's charms or a histrionic attempt at parent-child bonding. We pass the Disney studios: a 30-foot tall Mickey Mouse helium balloon tethered to a parking lot by bright red ropes. *You know Walt got frozen*, I say. My voice weirdly accusatory. Mom replies, *that's an urban legend*. I say *no, he's beneath Disneyland, in a fucking cryogenic box, right below the Pirates of the Caribbean*. She accelerates onto the 134, stays in the slow lane. I look out my window, at the Priuses with their bumper stickers that say *My father went to the Republican National Convention and all he got me was this lousy white cowl*. I'm trying to wrap my head around why she so ferociously caretakes my innocence with her omissions, never having brought me on her weekly trips to visit Andy, not telling me about Grandma's imminent demise until four hours ago. It makes no sense, as if by protecting me I wouldn't share her unnatural

attachment to him. As if she innately understood that zombie children are the most dangerous. Their stunted growth capitalizes on your sympathies, you allow them close and they nip deadly at your ankles. Mom says, *Grandma would have liked us to get her one of those boxes.* Her sniffing flares her capillaried nostrils. *That's not out of nowhere,* I say. Mom shakes her head. It's clearly a sequitur, and the fact that I don't get it has enraged her. Suddenly she swipes the station wagon onto the freeway shoulder, she hasn't been this angry at me since I was seven. It was a few months after Andy's accident, after another operation had left him caved in, without the bones on one side of his skull. She had just returned from the hospital to drive carpool and I started a spit war with my classmates and she pulled the Vista Cruiser station wagon over by an emergency call box. This time she slams on the brakes and in the front seat we jerk forward together. *Do you know what she thought?* she screams. *She thought that she could keep all disease away from her! She thought if she didn't think about death she would never die!* I reply, *So?* My voice has a *what's your problem?* sound to it. *In Ayurvedic medicine, if you never drink milk, you'll never be stung by mosquitoes. Maybe it's the same.* Mom cries, *it's not the same! It's not the same!* I say *look*, not wanting to get into it, *she didn't like spiders either, not even daddy long-legs! She didn't like anything creepy, can you really blame her for that? It's how she was.* Mom reaches for a Kleenex from a flowery box. Her voice is an acidic shrill: *Not once did Grandma come to see Andy in the hospital! Not once!* A remarkably straight vein pulses from Mom's temple down to her jaw. She glares at me, waiting for sympathy or solidarity. I return her gaze with as much flare-eyed resentment as I can muster. *Just take me to her, okay?* I roll down the window, push my head into the smog, remembering the year after the accident. Maybe Mom and Dad were

trying to conceive a replacement child and had no time for my phonics lessons, they pawned me onto Grandma and she took me to Manhattan. She had me stand atop the toilet seat in my aunt's apartment. There, out the bathroom window, stood the Empire State building, lit up red white and blue like a popsicle. Majestic, sparkling. Grandma's fingers curled protectively in the belt loops of my orange corduroy pants. In the baby blue Volvo I feel a vertiginous sensation like standing up too quickly but immensely pleasurable. Sullenly Mom blows her nose, her hands locked at ten and two on the steering wheel. She crashes back into traffic, driving with a recklessness utterly new to her. My sniffling nostrils suck in the stink of oleander, the black-leaved plant that sound-proofs the sides of freeways, a plant whose sole purpose is to absorb what is toxic and corrosive in this world.

*

The stairs up to Grandma's house are cracked by tree roots. Mom walks behind me, shuffling through the mail; social security payments and immigrant gardening crews. I am not ready to let Grandma go. Everything in me wants escape, mindless immersion in the most juvenile contradictions of zombie life, like why do zombies eat brains? They can't die of starvation or thirst, they don't require 2000 calories per day, so what's with the food requirements? Mom has to prod me before I bang the horseshoe-shaped knocker against the door. Dad lets me in, gives me a perfunctory once-over, no change in these disappeared years to his muppet eyebrows and hunched shoulders. I walk by him without saying hello, into a living room full of Louis XIV and slender sculptures of naked women. Mom sits herself primly down on a piano bench; I guess they don't kiss when in crisis. *Her heart is failing*, Dad says, sighing out each word as if reticent to burn energy

on me. *And there's fluid backing up in her lungs.* He's wearing a red Izod shirt, collar dusted with dandruff. *Which means?* I ask. *Basically, she's drowning.* I walk down the hall. Dad snarls, *nice talking to you.* The house doesn't smell of old people. It smells worse, unchanged, still the sweet lavender from the French soaps in the guest bathroom, the smell of pears. I make the turn into Grandma's well-lit room.

*

She looks so shrunken and animal now. I smile, because I am here, though her eyes are closed and a terrible sound is gurgling from inside her. Each shallow exhale bubbles up like a percolator. I reach the edge of the bed, slide my hand under her chalky fingertips. Already she's crumbling to dust. I wait for her to acknowledge my presence, for her bony shoulder to ripple some notation, for her filmy eyelids to twitch. In the backyard there's the paint-faded Indian totem pole that I used to slam into, head-first, at full speed, to try and bring Andy's coma upon myself. In the living room, Dad's voice has piped up an octave; he's haranguing Mom about coffin costs. I hear Mom *ssssh!* him. For some minutes I wait. When Grandma does not give me a sign, I whisper, *I'm with you now. I'm grateful for everything you did for me, did you know you saved me?* I think I feel her relax, her body settling imperceptibly into the sheet, and this brings me endless joy; it's a terrible time for Mom and Dad to stomp back in. I crane my head around. For fuck's sake, Mom's drinking a Diet Coke, looking demurely at the carpet. Dad says, *it might take a day or two, I'll stay here tonight,* but obviously Grandma's ready to die. She's shutting down. Dad knows it too, I can tell he's lying by the way he mines his ear for wax. I say, *I just got here.* He says *Benji*, as if he must make me diminutive, *you should go home with Mom.* I give him a skeptical look, one eyebrow up. *I promise,* he adds. Dig,

dig, digging into his ear. *She'll still be around tomorrow.* I hear the heavy water bubbling in Grandma's lungs. *I'm not going anywhere,* I say. *What,* whines Dad, *you're going to go on strike? You're going to chain yourself to the bed?* Mom says, *the ficus needs watering.* She takes her color coded keys from her purse and leaves the room. I force myself to breathe, as if the air is so stagnant that it can no longer move into my lungs. *You don't get it,* I say to Dad, *I want to be here.* Outside, the hummingbirds are twitting at the sugar water in the feeder, they peck at the blood-colored liquid with their beaks and pull back so sharply they have to rebalance their claws on the feeder's edge. *Benji!* yells Dad. He actually stamps his foot but it's an impotent thud. I get now that he is desperate, he needs her all to himself. Soon she will turn, and he knows that zombies inevitably betray those who loved them in life, they leave us behind. We are no longer able to prove ourselves worthy of their love, yet we believe they can still redeem us; this makes us reckless to regain our humanity in the maggoty face of their disappointments. *Please,* my father says. His palms are open and tremoring. It shocks me, but I feel compassion for him, I don't belittle his tyrant shtick. *Fine,* I tell him, *I'll go home.* It's like a gift, the brokenness instantly drains out of him. *Goodbye,* I say to Grandma. I kiss her cheek, feel her wrinkles on my lips, breathe in her parchment smell. Grandma with her gaunt skull and shrewd nose, everything spiteful and gorgeous and almost gone. I am about to whisper into her ear, *it's okay, you can go, I release you,* but I can't, I won't. She is not mine to release.

HOTEL GRAND ABYSS

THIS SITUATION IS CONTROLLABLE. PEOPLE MUST COME TO GRIPS WITH THIS CONCEPT. IT'S EXTREMELY DIFFICULT...WITH FAMILY...BUT A DEAD BODY MUST BE DE-ACTIVATED BY EITHER DESTROYING THE BRAIN OR SEVERING THE BRAIN FROM THE REST OF THE BODY.

---American Association for Dementia Education (AADE)

1.

In the sequel, things get bloody. Suspense mutates to horror; body counts escalate. The start of *Halloween II* recaps the climax of *Halloween I*: Jamie Lee Curtis stabbing her brother Michael Myers with a knitting needle in the neck, wire hanger through the eye. Donald Pleasence, playing the psychiatrist Sam Loomis, shoots Michael six times. He falls backwards off the second story balcony, only for the camera to reveal the imprint of his body on the flattened grass.

Once it starts moving forward, the sequel allows us to witness the illusion of change over time. Despite the promise of closure, events rarely decloud. The neighbors, hearing gunshots, emerge from their suburban homes; terrycloth bathrobes, cordless phone. The father says: "It sounds like the death out here." Gravely, without a hint of kitsch, Loomis replies: "You don't know what death is."

The conclusion of the previous story: my father, desperate for his mother's whispery absolution, had forcibly removed me from her deathbed. I was furious (on my way out, I ripped a healthy leaf off the ficus in the foyer), but something in me had softened. My father was, for once, human, vulnerable. Despite his conviction that each of

life's mysteries would, if discovered, submit to structuring principles, his heart still held. As grandma died, I sat in the back of Dad's car, my knees folded up against the passenger seat's magazine pocket. I popped honeyed peanuts, kept myself busy with a graduate seminar paper due the next week: why, in *Night of the Living Dead*, George Romero placed so much weight on the zombies' orgiastic consumption of the flesh they tore from the living.

At some point, I noticed that one of Dad's onyx cufflinks lay on the floor mat; probably he didn't know it had fallen. This resparked my resentment. I hated his mad professor routine. Even then, the man ran into doors.

Whatever benediction he received from my grandma didn't open him. To his credit, he didn't videotape grandma's funeral (as he had taped my twin brother's funeral). Otherwise, he made no further effort to close the gap between us. When I married Yukiko, our gift came right off the registry. He was skeptical, he said, of inter-species relationships. He sneezed at her relatives from Osaka without covering his nose.

As this sequel gets going, some fifteen years after the original, I am resetting the rubber seal inside my coffee maker, which this morning had leaked sizzling black drops onto the stove coils.

My father, I would guess, is sitting on the rollout couch in my sister Linci's home office, pouring reduced-fat milk out of his tennis shoe.

The behaviors we once called neurotic or flighty now alchemized into disease.

I take my Gaia Organic Blend coffee onto the front porch. I pick up a snail, set it on my palm. It moves a millimeter forward, then stops. It's dead, killed by the salt of my sweat. Wait: its slimy head just popped out. Thank goodness it's still alive.

I set it on the ground. Then I step on it.

In the sequel, I am an associate professor at UC Berkeley. Tenured. I am also, until this afternoon, the pre-eminent zombie specialist on the planet. The one who, at the café, substitutes the word "brains" for "beans" in photo-journalistic captions describing the coffee production process. "Once the brains are checked in and graded, they are spread by hand onto drying patios. The brains are baked periodically to ensure even and complete drying."

And my father? He's the man who, mealy-eyed, holds court with some form of invasive and irreversible dementia. He's the one in the McDonald's, cutting open and emptying packets of mustard onto the tray while I order for him a Diet Fanta and a Quarter Pounder. Which he doesn't know to unwrap, and, once unwrapped, can't bring to his mouth.

2.

My sister Linci wasn't in the previous story - she was at Oberlin, studying comparative religion. It's part of being a replacement child, she says, to be written out of history.

Now she's stretching her hamstrings in front of a shop window (the scallop pattern of wiper marks, evidence of cleaning, visible on the glass) that displays antique wheelchairs with wicker seats. Linci always wears black lycra tights with either a gold or a silver stripe; today it's silver. I wear Dolphin shorts; a few years ago I found 20 unopened pairs at an estate sale. Candy-cane stripes, slit sides, mesh supporting fabric.

We turn onto Fulton. We run leisurely, a heart-opener before the hills. I am slightly wobbly, not having completely recovered from an inner-ear infection, and grateful that Linci isn't pushing the pace.

"So you taking him or not?" she asks.

On her twelfth birthday, Dad supplemented Linci's donation to Greenpeace by giving her a necklace of whale teeth. As a result, through her teens, she barely bothered with him. And for the last two weeks, while he, barely housebroken, has stayed with Linci and her girlfriend Shareen, Linci has considered him more as a lodger than a father, his stay temporary and non-negotiable. Either I take Dad to my house, she argued, or to the Rockridge Estates Convalescent Home (rated by *Consumer Reports* as the best in the East Bay).

"You know," she adds, "what he did yesterday?"

"He's not a freak show."

"He's not getting any less freaky. Can you parse that?"

I don't like how Linci runs, her floppy wrists and forearms; she says it conserves energy.

"He wants to stay with me," I say.

Which isn't true. It nauseates me to envision him in some glorified hospice, even if it has its own *Dance Dance Revolution* with rack-mounted defibrillator unit.

"That's sweet," says Linci, "but it's a martyr's proposition."

"Am I the only one who cares about him?"

"Don't be an asshole," she replies. "I love him. You don't like him, but you love him. The home will take care of him."

We pass the greenhouses where they harvest top-secret crops of genetically altered corn. “I’m going to keep him,” I huff defiantly, “at least for now.”

“Now is not an indeterminate time period. Now is ninety days.”

Rockridge Estates operates on a quarter system. Every three months, there’s an orientation for the new starlings, as they call them, allowing them to bond and imprint. And tomorrow morning is the deadline for their next intake group.

“You think he’s normalizing,” says Linci, “and bam! He throws his Cream of Wheat onto the floor. Take my advice, and do what Shareen’s friend did when her cat started shitting everywhere. She put a Kleenex over each lump until it hardened.”

“Disgusting,” I say. We start to climb up Cedar Street. Linci tightens her pony tail. Quickly I’m too winded to talk, and I have to focus. The ground is fissured; the untrimmed rosemary bushes are giant afros that burst onto the sidewalk. Linci tells me about the preparations for tonight’s party, a celebration of the release of her first novel. The title, Hotel Grand Abyss, is taken from Lukács. It’s a mashup of the Love Boat and the *Inferno*. The protagonist is a woman known only as JM, who works as *Apocalypse Director* for the world’s most posh and decadent hotel. In the first chapter, despite an ongoing spiritual crisis and pseudo-nymphomania, she has set up a flaming tar pit in the quarry below the hotel. Every hour, on the hour, a live goat is thrown in. Microphones amplify its death-bleats up to the guests.

I stop at the top of the hill. Hunched over, hands on knees.

“Bottom line,” says a barely sweating Linci, “both of you will suffer horribly.”

“Point taken,” I say.

“But point received?” She starts to run again, which annoys me. At Memorial Stadium, girls are playing rugby. In the driveway of the hippie fraternity, an AMC Gremlin has a bumper sticker that says: “CTHULHU in 2008: Why Choose a Lesser Evil?”

Cthulhu, I recall, is a Lovecraftian demi-god of abject terror, unbearable to gaze upon.

“You’re right,” I say to Linci. She’s surprised; she thinks I’m taking her advice. I smile, then add: “Point not received.”

3.

As I rinse off from my run, I imagine how I will reconfigure my house. Install metal railings around the bed. Install metal railings in the shower.

I miss Yukiko. Even though Dad despised her on principle, she wasn’t afraid of broken hips and ganglial cysts, she would have tipped his head to drink from spouted cups.

Purchase a cross-hatched gate so he doesn’t fall down the stairs. Purchase no-slide socks in his favorite color, whatever that is. Knee pads?

I am childproofing my hotel.

As I pluck nostril hairs, (a laminated checklist taped to the bathroom mirror lists possible personal hygiene errors), I imagine how to reconfigure myself. Learn auto-hypnosis. Reduce the mysterious number of paper cuts I seem to pick up. Despite everything I’ve done to not be like my father, sometimes I can barely run the insinkerator without destroying a spoon.

Really: why do I want to take care of him? Maybe, as Linci said, it is masochism. Maybe I know I can't take care of him. I need to fail, which will compel him to talk about my failures so I can resent his resentment of the failures I've failed to avoid. Or I'm studying him. It's like having a zombie chained to a fence, limb by limb deteriorating off, to gather information about behavior under duress. What they tell us as they starve.

I brush out my shaggy hair. Yukiko taught me to brush from the tips, to untangle the knots, but I derive pleasure from the sound of the hair decoupling from my scalp.

Perhaps it's not a coincidence, me quitting zombies today. But why quit zombies at all? Here's why: this letter I received last week:

Dear Professor Dunkleman,

I am a 2nd year PhD student in Popular Culture studies at Brown University. This year I am planning to apply for a Fulbright scholarship to Algeria – my mother is Irish, and so my EU passport allows me entrance. My project is as follows. I hope to write a high literary novel, a zombie novel, that takes place in Oran in 1948. Given your expertise, I would like to interview you on what a zombie state might look like at that historical moment, in a country on the verge of decolonization. It would be, I hope, a worthy sequel to Camus' canonical novel The Plague.

I love this letter. I framed it, put it right next to a napkin signed by Trent Reznor (*Dear Benji, thanks to you, I know how to survive a zombie attack in the tundra. Rock steady, NIN*). But the writer betrays his ambitions. Zombies, like other pop-culture phenomena, are mutable, easily assimilated. It's not that they lose their ideological

weight, but their ideological time. For a while, we can use zombies to discuss more important topics; and then, when some South Korean company releases the first inflatable zombie sex dolls, their moment is gone.

“Why should anyone care about popular culture?” my father used to ask. “We’re nothing but jellyfish swimming in the ocean of popular culture, we flow with its current.”

We weren’t discussing my profession; it was just another thing he tried not to understand.

I trim the triangle of hair on my chin, dress in denim, tighten up my turquoise bolo tie. My hair is still wet; I should dry it. No, they won’t care at Oakland High, where in an hour I will give my final lecture on zombies, part of the “Professors Against Intellectual Poverty” campaign. The inner-city kids will ask the usual questions: if zombies are crackheads, if they sicken from radiation or virus, if they walk or run.

They, too, want to know why they should care.

More often than not, I tell them about a guy who, refusing to cry during his brother’s funeral, developed a pus-filled cyst on his tear duct. Eventually the cyst exploded; the infection almost blinded him. The symbolic taking physical form. Zombies, I tell them, are that cyst.

4.

Laetitia, a sophomore at seventeen, having sat on her hands fidgeting away the entire class period, her name printed cutely on a folded piece of paper, the classroom being a temporary building, a loud air conditioner blocking light from one of two windows, Laetitia asks, “Professor Dunkleman, how come there ain’t no nigger zombies?”

The instructor gives me a worried look. She's some twenty-two year old straight from Teach For America, paying for Xeroxes from her own measly salary.

But the question excites me. In a rush, I tell them that of course there were, um, African-American zombies. "What about Thriller?" I ask, to which four kids start moonwalking between the desks until the teacher yells them down. "What about the Sambo in *King of the Zombies*?"

Though I had only scarfed down half a banana after my run, I feel energy rippling through me. The other window, not made of glass but of Hefty Bag, is sucking the breeze in and out like an artificial lung the color of oil spill. "Why are they zombies?" I ask rhetorically. "To be slaves, caricatures, butchers. Step back from the brains and guts in these movies and all you feel is this tremendous fear. That's fear of you, as black, as outsider, as dangerous."

"That's obvious," someone says. "I want to know how come there ain't no ghetto nigger zombies? All the nigger zombies wear nice clothes. They live in Beverly Hills, don't they?"

Everyone laughs except for me. "Since zombies don't know class boundaries," I mumble, "all zombies are ghetto zombies."

Soon the bell makes its welcome, detuned tremolo. Laetitia comes up to me and says, "This present is to remember Class Nine." Then she rips a fake lacquered nail right off her thumb. "Ow," she says.

So this is my swan song, my curtain call: a teenager in the back row wearing headphones, deaf to the bell, stuffing a piece of lime green chalk into each nostril. And

Laetitia, shuffling out of the temporary building with her friends, singing the chorus of the Sister Sledge song, “We are ghetto nigger zombies, I got all my sisters and me.”

5.

I’m walking on campus. It’s windy, and warm for autumn. The branches of the trees that line Sproul Plaza are gnarled by leafless bulbs that resemble concrete-grey bee hives.

Once, when I was studying for doctoral exams, Dad came to visit. We watched *Silence of the Lambs*. That night, he went on an absolute tirade about the killer’s nipple rings. “Maybe you should write your dissertation on hermaphroditism and genital piercings,” he said derisively.

“Transvestitism,” I replied. I draped my arm around his shoulder. I couldn’t blame him for his anger, his melancholy (Mom, still asymptomatic in the original, had just died of ovarian cancer). He pined for something pre-lapsarian; parking meters that took nickels and dimes. Still, it devastated me, how unreachable he had become. How the next morning, breakfasting on my special bacon cheddar frittata, he insisted on catching an earlier flight home.

After I drove him to the airport, I let off steam in the basement of the Sproul Plaza arcade, repeatedly tilting a pinball machine called “The Machine,” which challenged you to assemble a perfectly proportioned female robot.

At multi-ball, she would purr, “Make me live!”

In part, my love for this particular pinball machine explains my failures with women; my goth girlfriend who would only have sex with me while wearing a black veil,

and Yukiko, who spiked tea ceremonies with scotch, who at some point could no longer compensate for the fact that I played backgammon with myself. And cheated.

Now, as then, the white-boy protesters wear Palestinian scarves wrapped about their dreadlocks. Out of politeness, I accept a flyer that proposes to jail Halliburton executives in the Iraqi jails they built. I'll use the flyer later, I have a new paper airplane design I want to test. I climb the marble stairs to my office, raise my computer from sleep, and open the following file:

To the Ever-Growing Legion of Zombie Admirers:

For the last twenty years, since my first book, "Zombie Renaissance: Divining Intestines in a Post-Capital Dystopia," I have mined - some would say invented - the field of zombie studies. Three years ago, the University of Chicago released my second book, "The Black Hunger: The Zombie Film and Critical Race Theory." My mission was not only to bring the zombie into the academic arena, but to bring the academic into the streets, to preside over zombie flash mobs and disaster preparedness exercises. And we have succeeded: the world now understands how central the zombie figures in our moment.

I may regret this decision; nonetheless, I feel that zombie studies must venture from their father. It is time for others to decode their discursive groans. Be assured that I am not turning away from the liminal in popular culture. It is (Woolf would not like such glib phraseology), a political decision as much as it is personal; the field between Lon Chaney and King Lear must be level(l)ed.

Respectfully, Ben Dunkleman (kingZomB2@kierkegaard.berkeley.edu)

As I change the word “liminal” to “spectral,” my cell phone rings. It’s my father. He wants to play golf on Linci’s Wii, but he can’t figure out how to use the controller. Linci’s in the office right next to him, but she won’t answer his calls.

“I’m sorry,” I say, thinking Linci a selfish bitch, “what about Shareen?”

“She’s setting up the croquet pitch.”

The balls, I’m sure, will be coated in pigs’ blood. The mallets will emit electric shocks.

I tell Dad that I’ll teach him golf at the party. Afterwards, we’ll take the Wii back home with us. Happily he replies that he wants to be Arnold Palmer.

I hang up, change “spectral” back to “liminal,” cut and paste the file into an email, click the send button. At first, I feel the fresh-cut grass smell of new beginnings. My next topic of inquiry, the 1974 television series *Land of the Lost*, represents a perfect opportunity to explore the non-nuclear family, time portals and dinosaurs named Alice and opal-studded cave walls. But almost immediately, I feel stupid, paralyzed. No more invitations to lecture about the survival rate of deep-sea zombies at some Holiday Inn in Tulsa. No longer can I deduct fake eyeballs off my tax return. Zombies. Dumb staggering vegetables who don’t shit, don’t chew gum. I have no idea who I’ll be without them.

6.

Towards the end of the party, my department chair (whose wife edited Linci’s book) jerks me into my sister’s study. “Zombies are your bread and butter!” he yells. “It’s career suicide!”

Though he thinks zombie studies are for feminist psychoanalytics, he still makes me eulogize at all the faculty funerals because, quote, I have so much direct experience with death. At least now, he won't spend his time lurching towards me at faculty meetings, bulging out his bulgy eyes, his hands outstretched to give me my cup of chamomile tea. Trying to lighten his mood, I tell him about *Land of the Lost*, recite a fake OED etymology of the word Sleestak, wedged between *sleepy sickness*, a disease of pregnant ewes characterized by somnolence and neuromuscular disturbances, and *sleer*, verb, obsolete, to look askance. He frowns. Citing a phobia of scurvy, he goes scampering off for more mini-carrots.

I check on Dad, who stands in the middle of Linci's living room. As he takes practice swings with the Wii controller, he mentions quite lucidly that he'd like to check out the local pitch-and-putt courses. Then he asks about that round thing attached to the door.

"It's a doorknob," I say. I want to cry. I resolve to put up signs in my house that name each object, signs that display directions to other rooms, until the signs cover everything to which they refer.

Dad asks me if I want to play nine holes. I decline. I'm irate at Linci. I prepare, as evidence of her callousness, her refusal to convert her office into a bedroom for Dad, and her efficiency at the barbecue, basting each eyeless salmon with precisely four strokes of olive oil.

Outside, in the backyard, a colonial white model hotel hovers on the precipice of the empty swimming pool, which is covered in tin foil so as to look flaming.

I stomp up to Linci. “You have to help me take care of him,” I yell. “You have no choice!”

“Remember when we found a dead squirrel,” she says, poking my shoulder with the spatula, “and Dad couldn’t logically figure whether to put it into the trash can or the recycling bin?”

“What’s that have to do with anything?”

Her friend approaches, and so I don’t continue – I’ll accost Linci later, in private. Sullenly I start scraping out the grill, picking at the black crust of charcoal and fish skin. They start chatting about the possible distribution of Hotel Grand Abyss to the Kindle. Someone inside the house lets out an anguished shout; it’s Dad. We find him in the living room, staring at a quantity of blood dripping from his hand. With the Wii controller, he must have hit the Tiffany Lamp, which sent stained glass into his skin.

“Christ, Dad,” says Linci, “don’t move.”

The golf game is replaying his last shot. At the dull, concussive thump of the ball burrowing into a sand trap, I know that I will give him up to the convalescent home. I know that never for a moment in his forgetting life will he forgive me. Avoiding the pieces of glass on the carpet, I take uneven steps towards my father; calmly I pry the controller from his hand.

STOMACHS OF THE HOMELESS

Every so often, usually in North Carolina, a bald, sun-beaten fisherman with bleeding knuckles and a Key West baseball cap winches up a recently killed great white. At the marina the scales are rigged. A girl eating cotton candy stands inside its popped cretaceous jaws while her parents take pictures. Of supreme interest: when they slit out a rectangle in the shark's stomach like carving a door in a crayon drawing of a house. And the loamy contents slopping onto the pier. Polyurethane buoys, human femurs, dolphin eyes – planks of what? a picket fence? like chipped paint-faded teeth.

The cinematography credits for Animal Planet scrolled down the screen. The dead skin on the back of my elbow flamed up, itched horribly; it was a sign that I sensed injustice. I burrowed my hands in the crack between sofa cushions. “Mandatory autopsies!” I screamed to my wife.

She said, “I thought you were napping, this is nap time.”

“Not autopsies for everyone,” I said. “For homeless citizens.” It would display how alien and unapologetic their diet. Unthawed fish sticks? Shiitake mushrooms? Grains of tapewormy rice?

“I can’t enter the stomach of a homeless person,” I added. I was distraught. I wanted to abandon this life, become a beer-making monk. A Cistercian. This longing for integrity was so jagged and deep-flowing in me that I storyboarded a video game called *Escape from Skid Row*. It was positively Randian.

“Incidentals of the unendurable body / ” I wrote that night, squeezing a bottle of ketchup onto the kitchen table, “The crescent moon between finger and fingernail / Most humiliating to the unhumble.”

My wife, whom my insomnia had pinned awake, said, “Don’t do that, we’re running out of sponges.” A few paper towels later, it was unwritten.

I tried to make reparations. Thursday afternoon, waiting for my wife to pick me up from the Y, I scraped up a chat with one street person. He, recently showered, begged two-dollar bills from the flushed pink silk-bloused women filing in pairs from Intermediate Pilates. I asked him what he did with the charity leftovers – the melted gummi bears given altruistically by long-armed children, the chicken wings from KFC drooled on by packets of honey-mustard sauce. Did he consume things that repulsed him?

He tipped his grey felt hat, a zoot-suit hat. The quivering feather. “Watch them,” he said.

I did. Their spidery hands buried thick in their pockets. The guilty buckling of their voice.

“If it’s good people,” he said, “the food’s good.”

Good people sometimes eat rotten food, but I didn’t argue.

Via an increasingly vociferous debate over the best type of clam chowder, we realized that we, aged similarly, shared a teenage obsession with the movie *Jaws*. While I wanted to be Quint, jowly and Ahabic and possessing a yacht-sized death drive, he identified most keenly with the sensitive sharkologist played by Richard Dreyfuss. Yet unlike Dreyfuss, he believed that there was no reason to kill the shark. What the denizens of Amity Island understood as testicular, unpatriotic, malevolent aggression, it was just

millions of years of stupidity cured to a highly refined but shallow-banded intelligence.

The walnut-sized brain.

“Why else,” he said, “would a shark eat a rubber tire?”

“He was going to feed and feed and feed,” I said. It was a quote.

“Twenty miles up the coast,” he said, “there’s all the Charlie Tuna he wants.”

Complexity, I thought that night, is the divisor’s remainder of privilege.

Eventually, no one at the Y would play squash with me. I couldn’t keep track of the score, I scuffed the parquet with the wrong-soled shoes. So I let my membership lapse. My wife was irate, she didn’t think she would survive without my habits. To everyone involved, I was the one pulling myself underwater.

IN THE ROOM / MEMORY IS / WHITE

Around the corner from the Mulhouse's adobe-tiled two-bedroom, teenagers hang out on a short, hilly dirt road. It's a few blocks from the high school. When necessary, they retreat behind the dusty scattered white oaks. It is rarely necessary.

Dorian stands at the top of the hill, kicking odd-sized rocks down towards the stop sign. *Crap*, she says to her friends. *Gotta hustle*.

If Dorian's boyfriend is monkey-fingered with matches, she is clumsy with time, and is almost late, again, to take care of Jacob. She gives away the rest of her cigarette. Faint polka dots of ash cover the canary-yellow mailbox next to her.

She has been kidsitting Jacob for two months now; for two months, since the Mulhouses' first *Dine and Debate* night, she has held a vague, low-level worry for him. She likes Jacob, likes how he stretches out her name. She mistrusts Dr. and Mrs. Mulhouse. They overpay her, which is either stupid or arrogant or both. They can ask any of their friends the going rate.

Dorian feels especially uneasy this afternoon. Something's accelerating, becoming smelly, a cheap slab of meat gone bad. Mrs. Mulhouse calls her for *Dine and Debate* nights; never for afternoons. During the day they let Jacob take care of himself.

*

Mrs. Mulhouse wanted to come home before Jacob; she wanted to have a lid-peeled fruit cup waiting for him on the kitchen table, especially since she would barely be able to talk

to him before she had to leave again to her appointment. Nonetheless, claiming to have forgotten her purse in her desk drawer, she told her boss, the ophthalmologist, to go on without her. She had just enough time.

Considering she had kicked Dr. Mulhouse out for lying, she looked harshly even upon white lies; she would make herself pay for this one later. But later, she wouldn't be able to compose herself.

She sat herself in the examination chair, lowered the fly machine in front of her eyes, and turned the dials until the room lost focus – grew thick, furry. And further, until she felt a soft gnashing, like an old-fashioned pencil sharpener in her stomach. The nausea comforted her. Then she dialed it back down. Settled into seeing shapes. She felt the stitching in the leather chair. The things she knew stood in front of her, the oversized mason jars of long Q-Tips and eye washes. They were no longer there. They were something else.

*

Dr. Mulhouse leaves work early. He lets his car, a silver BMW, coast down the spiral of the parking garage. A box of Frosted Flakes is belted safely on the passenger seat. The open window sucks in the echoes and muffler pops from the many floors. Parking is \$1.15 and he has \$1.05 handy and though he has kept his practice in this building for years, the attendant won't let the dime slide. *Is this really fair?* he asks. The attendant, obviously stifled all day in his shack, holds out his hand. Dr. Mulhouse undoes his seat belt, removes his wallet from his back pocket. Above the door hangs the shimmering transparent plastic protecting his dry cleaning. For the last month, he has kept his work clothes in the car.

He wants to staple the attendant's fingers into the slit of the time clock.

He supposes that he should show his anger more often. Like when he found out Jacob had cavities. His rage, what he considered a terrible loss of control, actually made Irene happy. *I'd rather have married a screamer, she'd said in bed that night, than a man who shrinks from passion like a dog from an electric fence.*

*

Mrs. Mulhouse made salad. She mixed lettuce, sunflower seeds, and chopped carrots in a big wooden bowl, poured oil and vinegar into what she called cruets. Normally, she and Jacob ate Hamburger Helper with the salad, but tonight Dr. Mulhouse was home. He hadn't been around very much – two days a week, tops.

Jacob watched his mother stuff the crown roast with apples. She was humming, preoccupied; it was a good time to visit the master bedroom. Dr. Mulhouse lounged on his bed, wearing only his underwear and grooved black socks that reached his knees. He was watching the Kings. His favorite was Marcel Dionne. *If there is such a thing as grace, he once told his son (And I'm not saying there is, he said to his wife), it can only exist on ice.*

Jacob didn't have much time. His mother had been going back and forth from the kitchen to the bedroom, asking Dr. Mulhouse, who was a pediatrician, about chicken pox, or phoning Dorian, who for some reason was coming tomorrow afternoon.

Jacob jumped on the bed. Dr. Mulhouse pulled his son towards him, nestled Jacob in the crook of his arm. Then he picked up a racquetball from the night table and bounced it against Jacob's forehead and Jacob giggled.

Will you take me to the supermarket after dinner? asked Jacob.

Your mother can take you, said Dr. Mulhouse.

Mom can't know! Jacob wanted to buy her a present. An elephant charm.

The Maple Leafs don't have enough gas left in the tank, Dr. Mulhouse said.

Please, will you take me?

What are you getting me?

Jacob didn't answer. Dr. Mulhouse rubbed his hand across his dark sideburns, which had spread in the last month, become more wiry and three-dimensional. *I can't take you tonight,* he said. *And you should buy her a jewelry box. It's cheaper.*

*

Dorian presses the lit doorbell. Her black hair smells of smoke, but she doesn't care. Jacob lets her in.

How's it going, little vole? she says.

Jacob smiles. He's a bit effeminate, with a bowl cut and a kind, round face that makes him seem incapable of that sadistic streak common to ten-year olds. He comes up close, tracing the futuristic insectoid spaceship on her Journey T-shirt. It doesn't bother her.

I don't know when I'll be back, says Mrs. Mulhouse. She's exceptionally nervous today. The delicate rings on her fingers make her knuckles look gnarly. *Three or four hours perhaps, I don't know.* Gently she pinches the bridge of Jacob's nose and says, *All Cows Eat Grass, okay?* That much Dorian recognizes from music class. She'd been terrible at it – bad ear, choppity rhythm.

How's Dr. Mulhouse? asks Dorian. *I haven't seen him in forever.*

Fine, says Mrs. Mulhouse. *Apparently more kids are sick this year than ever*

before, he's been forced into scheduling late appointments.

Jacob demands crab casserole for dinner. *There's Hamburger Helper*, says Mrs. Mulhouse, rolling her eyes. She hugs him and grabs her lipstick off the kitchen table and goes out.

Dorian would swear that Mrs. Mulhouse was about to cry.

*

Jacob took out their World Book Encyclopedia – eight volumes per shelf - to do research on elephants. Some letters didn't merit a single edition. Q, or X. Sometimes, in class, he wished his last name started with Q or X - invisible, too insignificant to warrant attention.

Elephants had big brains and used their ears to cool their blood and the kids had babysitters called allomothers. Jacob laughed. That made Dorian an allomother. He readjusted himself, tilted so that his bare heels were atop the back of the couch, dangerously close to a precarious spoon and two empty *Snack Pack* puddings. He had the house to himself. Mom was at some appointment.

Some countries, he read, considered white elephants holy. Or good luck. That's what Jacob thought too. He turned back a few pages. The entry on electricity told of a pregnant elephant named Topsy, who was killed by Thomas Edison – he'd been commissioned to electrocute Topsy because Topsy had killed his minder, who had stubbed out cigarettes on poor Topsy's tongue.

*

The outpatient clinic is squat like a bunker –thick concrete pocked with little holes (air bubbles?). It's the type of building her husband calls New Brutalist. Even then, three weeks ago, Mrs. Mulhouse wondered from which dictionary he pulled that ugly term.

Now, each time she comes here, she imagines some exotic style of boxing, with diamond knuckles, maybe.

She parks where she can see the entrance/exit to the parking lot, so she can watch for her husband's car in the rear view mirror. She should go in alone, she thinks, double-checking the pads and extra pair of underwear in her purse, and come out alone. It's a powerful way, as her therapist said, to find her footing. She finds that ironic, since finding her footing is proving difficult with her bloated feet.

Just because she kicked him out, she'd told Dr. Mulhouse, didn't mean she didn't want him here. That's what the Crown Roast had meant.

Horizontal jetties of concrete jut out from each floor of the clinic. The workers can look out, but not up or down. Dull dirty concrete blocking the sun. It's depressing. Everyone leaving the building comes out squeaking, in wheelchairs. Three minutes until her appointment.

*

Jacob came up with the idea of the elephant pendant because Dr. Mulhouse had become interested in current events. Each Monday, Jacob had to bring into class an article on some contemporary topic; on Sundays, he and his father pored over the paper. Patiently, using small words, Dr. Mulhouse explained the situation in Cambodia to Jacob, the significance of Kissinger's Africa visit. He mentioned something about greasy Teamsters, and Jacob, with his new left-handed scissors, cut out the corresponding article on steel plants.

He found the ad for the elephant pendant in the metro section: *Pure ivory, with a real Emerald Eye! Only \$49.95!* He could afford it; he had been saving for a make-your-

own-radio kit.

He could see his mom putting on the necklace. He could feel the halo of a kiss on his forehead. The elephant's watching emerald eye, wise. She would, at that moment it happened, have forgiven him for the television - without even knowing he had broken it. And Dad would stop tiptoeing out at night – when he left, Jacob heard him turning the alarm off, then on again.

*

I don't have much homework left, Jacob says to Dorian. Again he looks at the clock on the oven.

For an hour Jacob and Dorian have been sitting at the Mulhouses' circular dining table, doing homework and nibbling on Oreos. They were out of fruit cups, and Mrs. Mulhouse had forgotten to tell Dorian about Jacob's teeth. Jacob hadn't told her, either. Dorian can hear, despite the glass door to the backyard, the motor of the filtration unit on the Mulhouse's hot tub.

I can finish it later, he adds.

That's not the way it goes, little vole. Besides, I have my own homework.

Dorian tailors every school assignment around a single interesting and obscure topic. This semester, it's Tasmanian devils. History: colonization of Tasmania, desecration of the aboriginal population. Science: quarternary glaciation and edible pods. Today, math: given how many devils are run over by freight trucks yearly, and given reproduction cycles, when will the devil population become endangered?

Dorian puts her eraser on the lazy susan and wheels it around to Jacob. *Thanks*, he mumbles. He has been erasing not an incorrect answer but something he has drawn

repeatedly in the margins of his English grammar book.

Thirty minutes later, he catches her eye. *I'm done. Can we go to the supermarket now? I'll give you five dollars.*

You don't need to give me five dollars. Why do you want to go so badly?

I want to buy Mom a present.

If it's for a good cause, she says, sure, we can go.

Jacob jumps out of his chair. He puts his foot on the bathroom doorknob, hoists himself up on the door, and maneuvers into a crawl space above his closet. In it stands a two-foot-tall ceramic cobra. Mrs. Mulhouse bought it for him when they took a field trip to Olvera Street. The cobra has a hole in the bottom of its coiled base, plugged by a rubber stopper. Jacob unplugs it, counts and recounts his savings, and climbs back down.

*

Jacob hid in the Jacuzzi. He'd started taking refuge there, with only a few inches of breathing room between the water and the heavy octagonal cover that smelled like a skateboard wheel. He made quiet frog noises that echoed darkly in the narrow band of air. He blew bubbles in the hot stale water. Then, he emerged clean, triumphant, lungs blessed with oxygen, blessed with the perfume from the scattering of bruised persimmons fallen from the tree.

His parents were fighting about the broken television. He had sneaked out through the front door, gone around back, and climbed into the Jacuzzi. They were still fighting, but now they were in the kitchen, arguing about something else.

So, he heard his father yell, it's all the principle of simplification?

Not simplification, said his mother. Common sense.

It makes no sense. Before this Tricia business, this is exactly what you wanted!

Can you not say her name in this house?

Goddamn stingers!

Did it get you?

Jacob heard the dull shudder of the kitchen's sliding glass door. He pushed up on the Jacuzzi cover with his head until he could see. Dad was trying to smash a wasp with a rolled-up newspaper. The wasp was stupid. Even when avoiding Dr. Mulhouse, it resettled on the same window. Finally his dad killed it.

Good work, said his mother. She had been wiping the crescent under her eyes though she hadn't been crying. She pulled a glass from a cabinet.

Dr. Mulhouse crushed the wasp with the heel of his loafer, picked it up, and threw it outside. *Before then*, he said, pleading, his hand resting on the glass door, *you would have given up everything. Everything. For God's sake, we even tried.*

It was too early then; it's too late now!

Listen to me. This is a gift.

You think your seed is some blessing? She slammed shut the cabinet. The porcelain mugs and wine glasses shook. *You think my body is a crowbar you can use to pry back into this house?*

I won't go in with you.

I'll go myself! Please, I can't fight; I feel like I'm going to throw up. Just leave, okay?

It's not like you're forty, you know. It's not like it would be a mongoloid.

Jacob grew tired from holding the cover. Were they talking about a garden? There

was a patch of raspberries Mom was always complaining about. And where was Mom going?

When Jacob's father left for work in the morning, he took a mahogany leather briefcase. On days when he played racquetball, he took a red satchel with white straps. But now, when his mother said *Out!* and his father left, all he took was a box of Frosted Flakes. Leaving Jacob with Raisin Bran.

*

How can such a simple procedure take so long? Since it was illegal when Dr. Mulhouse was in med school, he didn't learn about it, doesn't know how they do it. Still, it seems so crude - scorch the earth, destroy everything. Like beating an egg; the singular, unbroken unit, which he would never one day call Jennifer or Darcy, becomes, under the pressure of fork - or what? a curette? - a clear and yellowish spiral, like a galaxy, and then totally diffuse, what the doctors call terminated.

The receptionist glances at him, turns away. He's sure she has been giving him dirty looks. Perhaps the counselor told her that when she asked him how he felt about the matter, he sat there mute, his brow furrowed, until finally Irene said, *Obviously he does not approve.*

He should have lied. Said *Yes, of course, Godspeed to it.*

If he doesn't know what he wants, then how can what comes out of his mouth not be a lie? It's such curious math, he thinks - not having any idea how that phrase came to him - that he wants this life, this marriage, but not this configuration.

What's worse, he has no idea what to change. So he's a liar every word of the way.

The walls are painted blue and pink. Why? It's disgusting for this kind of office. The goldfish sleep behind the small, rust-colored treasure chest. Dr. Mulhouse lets the oxygen bubbles mesmerize him. In groups of two and three, they rise through the tank and, at the surface, explode.

*

Dr. Mulhouse had been away for some days, and when he returned, he found his wife preparing dinner. He touched her lightly on the arm, as if trying not to scare her. *Oh, you're here*, she said, and he replied, *I'm happy to see you*, and she said, preheating the oven, *I don't know if I'm happy or not*. He didn't want to fight. Jacob's door was open, which was unusual; he was cutting a hole in the South Atlantic on his globe. Evidently the door was already there; Jacob was simply widening it. Why? Some kind of hiding place? Dr. Mulhouse didn't bother him. Let him have his secrets. In the living room he used the remote to turn on the television, but no picture came up. Sound, but no picture. *What the hell?*

What's wrong? asked Mrs. Mulhouse, coming in from the kitchen.

What's wrong? How could you do this?

Do what?

Through Mrs. Mulhouse's therapy sessions, in which her bitch therapist suggested that the separation was actually *profitable to her psyche*, Mrs. Mulhouse taught him about passive-aggressive behavior. This, he thought, turned the tables. A textbook example. *You want to hurt me*, he yelled, *so you break my new television?* He got on his knees behind the television and, inch by inch, examined the power cord for frays. *You destroy my pleasures?*

Are your golf clubs broken? Wouldn't that have been a better target?

In your room! Dr. Mulhouse yelled at Jacob. He had been peeking. Jacob closed his door. Dr. Mulhouse fetched a screwdriver from the kitchen.

What in heaven's name are you doing?

You must have done something to it, he said, unscrewing the television's back plating. She clearly knew nothing about the television, but he couldn't bring himself to apologize. While she was a good wife, at least on some statistical level, every brainless thing he had done was somehow her fault.

Mrs. Mulhouse was in tears. *The casserole's going to burn,* she said. He noticed in his peripheral vision that she was heading to the bathroom. *I'm making it sick,* he thought. He had already, in his anger, stripped the screw, but he kept digging in.

*

Dorian drives Jacob down the hill in her *Nova*, from the suburbs into the flats, through the El Salvadoran neighborhood.

She does, in fact, want to go to the supermarket. She loves the supermarket – the free samples and fluorescent lights and lack of flies. It's the cleanest, whitest place in the universe. She knows seven types of apples. And the shopping sprees - what an unexpected bonus. She had planned her next spree for this weekend, but Jacob will need his space, and it will take, as she knows, exactly three minutes.

What's a mongoloid? Jacob asks her. She doesn't know, she tells him, other than maybe someone from Mongolia. After that he says nothing.

It scares her, Jacob this quiet, and it's sabotaging the mental run-through of her planned spree. Never does he offer information on his own, but like a Venus Flytrap,

once she says something, he latches onto it. She tries to find out what he's going to buy. *Magic Shell?* He doesn't even shake his head. Nor can she persuade him to play the car game – a game that has never, with other children, failed her. Pointing out the most expensive cars. If a car had a broken headlight, you'd scream, Padiddle! for extra imaginary points.

She can see the strip of skin between Jacob's pant leg and his socks. His hands are tightly clasped in the lap of his turquoise corduroy *Garanimals*. She asks him: *What animal is blue? Whale?* He doesn't say. *Marinated herring?*

If Jacob were her egg, like the unboiled one she had to care for in Home Economics, what would she do? She put her egg in a small basket for strawberries and lined the sides with hay to protect it. It's not her place, but maybe she should say something to Dr. and Mrs. Mulhouse. She would say, I think you need to put more hay in the basket.

They drive past her high school. It's a few blocks off-route, but she loves the flowers surrounding the flagpole: birds of paradise and lilies and dahlias. The marquee says there's a bake sale today. There's time for introspection later, little vole, when you're a teenager. Now's all about tide pools and mud pits and baby geckos, their glorious green scaly bodies, each one latching its tiny teeth around your finger. Now's a time not to look so beaten.

*

Jacob followed Mrs. Mulhouse into the living room. She walked right past the television. She sat on the step of the stone fireplace and looked out into the backyard, where a squirrel once fell dead from an electrical wire and landed on his father's last raspberry

plant. He insisted on calling Animal Control to take away the possibly rabid squirrel.

His mother didn't even look at the television. Instead, she sat there with a glass of wine, pinging it with her fingernail.

Jacob closed the bottom half of the Dutch door that opened onto the kitchen. He set a small yellow Nerf ball on the carpet, then kicked it with his bare foot into the open space over the door.

Don't you want to play with your new scissors? she asked. *You seemed to like them.*

Jacob did like them, and he appreciated the fact that his mother didn't really want him to be left-handed. The only other left-handed person in his class was a red-bobbed girl named Tiffany. The class called her *The Artist*. Once she drew a child with a yellow balloon, but the string tied to the child's wrist was an electrical cord and the balloon was the sun. She went steady with Jacob for one day, then called and broke it off. He'd been despondent. His mother, taking his side, said to his father: *An artistic mind has a good chance of shorting out.* Jacob didn't understand that.

I'm doing this now, Jacob said to his mother. He picked up the ball and squeezed it and watched it unsquish.

It's true, you have so many toys.

Jacob set the Nerf ball in a more difficult spot, one that required a lot of lift to clear the corner of a table.

I don't think another toy will solve the problem, she said.

Jacob kicked the ball. It hit the Dutch door's doorknob and, lucky bounce, went through the open space.

Goal, said Mrs. Mulhouse. She kept ping-pong her glass. The sound was regular, didn't resonate. It was like some kind of timer. Or a countdown on a game show.

*

Only pride and Dr. Mulhouse's steady hand allow Mrs. Mulhouse to reach her car without fainting. She is in that much pain. Despite the anesthetic. It's not just nerve endings, she thinks, it's nerve endings filtered through clots of emotional damage.

They take her car from the medical center. This relieves her. She could rely on her car, even its imperfections – the difficulties in latching the hood, or how the emergency blinker, once on, takes ten minutes to shut off. In his car, she would have kept her eyes closed. Everything about him arouses suspicion.

Here he is, destroying their marriage, and yet he calmly unlocks her car door, so supportive and, in a practical way, wise. Even suggesting that they needed to pick up food for dinner. She hadn't thought of it. How tenderly he helps her into the passenger seat, picks up her legs, one at a time, and sets them in the car.

A man like that – awful and kind – is a man she should learn to hate. But the pain is too intense and vast for her not to accept his help. Pain, she thinks, makes you stupid.

*

Jacob came in through the back. The key to the sliding glass door was hidden in a terracotta pot. Letting himself into the house had once felt exciting, adventurous, but it had become routine. He pulled the ice-cube tray, which looked like a silver canoe, out of the freezer, cracked out the ice cubes, and refilled the tray.

Two weeks before, Mrs. Mulhouse, upon returning from work, had looked at Jacob and gone straight to the television. What had made her suspicious? He didn't know.

It's hot, she said. *If it's hot, it means you're watching television instead of doing your homework. Is that true?* Jacob shrugged. She used a Kleenex to wipe a smear of makeup from below her eye. *Go to your room*, she'd said, *I'm too tired to punish you.*

His idea was brilliant. Cold countered heat, fizzled it out. He arranged the ice cubes atop the television and turned it on and ran back into the kitchen. There, he grabbed two Oreos, which Mom had moved to an upper shelf, and a napkin – he was careful with crumbs, which liked to hide in the carpet. His timing was perfect – the animated intro to *Batman* was just coming on. He loved the boomerangs, the Batcave, but mostly he loved the almost lulling rhythm of the show, the inevitable returns. Batman and Robin would be imperiled early, triumphant late. And the villains? Captured, only to escape again, and again.

He lay on the carpet, on his stomach, propped on his elbows, cupping his head with his hands. The villain was The Black Widow – a stupid episode; it was always stupid if the villain wasn't The Joker or The Riddler or The Penguin. He split an Oreo and licked the cookie, which felt scratchy, like licking the moon.

Soon came the commercials, and he jumped up and ran outside. He had to turn on all the sprinklers before the commercials ended. Even with The Black Widow, he didn't want to miss anything.

When he got back, he saw smoke wafting from the top of the television. It smelled burnt, like the coffee Mom had started to drink. Shit! A few weeks ago, he said it out loud, and Mom got really mad. Mom looked at Dad to say something, but he didn't.

Jacob punched off the knob. Most of the ice had melted, and water dripped into the TV set. He swept the rest of the ice onto the carpet, but the smoke kept coming. The

screen was black except for a single bright line across its middle. There was still sound: *That's not the ruby of Mesopotamia, yelled Robin, but imitation zircon covered in cherry frosting!*

The ice didn't even do what it was supposed to do – the television was still slightly warm. He climbed onto the kitchen counter and removed the battery from the smoke detector. He opened all the windows. Then, for ten minutes exactly, he stood in his closet, his face pressed against a dark corner.

When he emerged, he tried to read his science book, but he couldn't stop crying and the words were blurry. He kept listening for Mom's car. He kept sniffing the air.

*

Jacob runs towards the supermarket. He almost trips on the curled-up front of the mat that opens the electric doors. Someone shouts at him to walk. The side of the elephant seller's cart is halfway down the long hall, between the checkstands and the supplemental businesses – bank, dry cleaners. There's a florist and a pharmacy on the far side of the cart. He used to like comparing the smell of roses to the smell of rose-scented air fresheners, but now that bores him. He keeps running; he should hurry. Still, he really wants a bag of candy corn. He hasn't been allowed any sweets since he got cavities. He loves the smooth waxy exterior - tri-colored, like a firework lit at night – and the mushy insides.

He wiggles under the turnstile; the idea of the candy corn distracts him. He has memorized everything he can do with candy corn:

- Stick up nose, snort them out
- Make vampire teeth
- Lick them and connect for buildings or picket fences
- Thread needle, make a cannibal necklace

- Rubber band across room
- Melt in microwave
- Push fingers in to see fingerprints

There's a crowd of people surrounding the elephant cart. What if they're sold out of elephants? He ducks back under the turnstile.

*

Before Dr. Mulhouse got dressed, he put the bolsters back on the sofa bed. It was the office of the divorced woman from their *Dine and Debate* group – she freelanced, made architectural drawings. She wouldn't take him in her own room. Even more shamefully, she retreated to her kitchen as soon as her breath had sufficiently slowed. The back door was aslant from the house frame and he had to pull hard to shut it. Behind him, the goddammed wind chimes crashed – he wished she'd tie them up. Of course, if she did, she wouldn't know when he left.

He spent a minute adjusting the mirrors on the loaner car. Last week, rushing from her house, he had backed into a trash can, and now his car was at the repair shop, having its dents hammered. He drove down the canyon, unwrapped a Peppermint Pattie. Soon he got on the freeway. It was foolish and destructive to go straight home from there, but he had no time to take a shower. A few times a week, as per agreement, he came home to have dinner, watch TV with Irene and Jacob, and put Jacob to bed. Then he would go back to his hotel, where they no longer put mints on his pillow; he had to nick them from the front desk.

If only he could explain to Irene why he couldn't break off the affair. The truth was, he didn't know. It wasn't the sex, which, like checkers, simply demanded his attention for a particular period of time. *You made it through med school*, Irene said. *Give*

that brain of yours a wash and see what comes out. He wanted to understand, but he only approached clarity when trying, in his head, to explain it to an imaginary older Jacob.

Dear Jacob, he would say to his hotel mirror, *sometimes the gnawing is greater than the quiet satisfactions. Try and resist it.*

He clicked open the garage door. Mrs. Mulhouse had taken up both spaces. Irritated, he backed up and parked on the street.

Jacob sat at the dinner table, fully occupied with his handheld electronic game, the one where you were a fireman holding a stretcher or a trampoline or a big sheet, and your job was to catch babies thrown from a burning building. Did his son have any idea what was going on? Irene took his coat, as she always did, and draped it neatly over one of the dining room chairs. In part, it was the way she held onto the little rituals, like they were a lifeboat, that made him want to bring his open hand down on a cactus and have the entire family watch him bleed. How could he not know how to change things? The color of blood had nothing to do with oxygen. His would be bright orange, the flame of a gas stove.

Did something happen at work today? asked Irene.

Sure, something happened, he said, not kissing her cheek, *just nothing of interest.*

Dear Jacob, he thought, hotels are expensive and bleak.

*

The supermarket is across the street from the high school Jacob will go to if Dr. and Mrs. Mulhouse don't divorce and Jacob has to move away. It shares space in the mini-mall with old New York chains: Nathan's, with its extra long hot dogs and Coney Island photographs, and HoneyBaked Hams. Honey and ham together? A terrible idea. *Can we*

get Carvel? asks Mrs. Mulhouse. She doesn't crave the ice cream – she wants the fake icing shaped like a man's Pompadour atop the cakes.

That's not what you should be eating, he says. *You wait in the car.*

Why? she says, opening her door.

Dr. Mulhouse has already picked up her antibiotics, so they walk directly through the pharmacy at one end of the supermarket. The pain radiates in spikes from her cervix. Her left side hurts terribly. Each cramp makes her stop, bend over, clutch herself. Even with a shopping cart, which they don't really need, her gait is limping and uneven.

We shouldn't have, says Dr. Mulhouse. *We made a mistake.*

She waves him off. One by one, they pass through the turnstile. It takes her almost a minute. *Bastard,* she says.

*

When Jacob got home from school, having spent himself running from Morgan Crisp (the class called him Morgan Crispy) during both recesses and lunch, he changed immediately into his Batman swimsuit. The hot tub was luke-warm - the sun had heated the water nicely. Cold water made his toes hurt.

A few nights ago, Mom and Dad had fought for so long that finally he grew bored and closed the door to his room. He took a pillow and a book – A Wrinkle in Time - and climbed up into the crawl space. He had fallen asleep there.

Ever since, he made sure to be in the hot tub before Mom got home. He had even cleaned off the thick layer of goopy algae with a broom. Then, to get the goop off the broom, he had to use his fingers.

He used the strap on the underside of the hot tub cover to pull the cover over him.

The water reached his lower lip. On the other side of the property wall, the neighbor's Great Dane barked and barked.

Four dead wasps floated in the water – how did they get there? As a game, with one cupped hand, he tried to herd them from point to point. Into the gaping mouth of the filter, but not inside! Next, he split them into two groups of two and, using both hands, raced them from one side of the hot tub to the other.

Then the cover lifted up and sunlight streamed in, making the water oily bright like soap bubbles, and his Mom was standing over him.

He lifted his arm a little out of the water, as if offering it to her. She was going to pull him out and spank him. Even though Coke had now been declared off-limits, he had taken a glass, left it on the table. *Sorry*, he whined.

She kneeled. Dead wasps scattered slow-waved across the water. *Can I come in?* she asked. Clothes and all, she got in and tugged the cover over them. The top of her sleeve floated to the surface. *What do you do in here?*

I don't know.

Are you running away from us?

A wasp drifted towards his mother. Jacob swished it away. *I don't know*, he said again. He wanted to get out, now that it wasn't a secret place any more. And it frightened him, seeing her like this. Still, he liked being with his Mom, liked it being quiet.

You've been so bottled up, she said. *Maybe you should be an artist after all.*

Jacob opened up the cover, folding it back over on itself. He climbed out of the tub. *I'll get you a towel*, he said.

*

In the supermarket, Dorian is content to let Jacob do what he wants. Even if the Mulhouses return early, they still have an hour. Jacob can keep his big secret to himself, and she can run her shopping spree.

Dorian has a thing for *Laverne and Shirley*, and when she saw the episode where they won a contest to go on a shopping spree, she got all her friends to imitate it. Three minutes in a supermarket, what could you bring out? Of course Laverne and Shirley blew it. They got greedy, stuffed their angora sweaters with smoked oysters, and didn't make it across the line, except for one outstretched hand. Shirley lay collapsed on the floor, like an obese, toppled Statue of Liberty, holding a single roll of paper towels.

No way is this going to happen to Dorian. She has devised a million different routes, based on expense, type of food, the ingredients for recipes she wants her mother to make. Certain aisles she can skip, like the aisle with pet food, but that makes for more intricate cart patterns. Now she's on aisle five. She passes the different meats – slabs, chunks, T-bones, pork chops, roasted and smoked, different types of cut up cow and pig.

What if Dr. and Mrs. Mulhouse just disappeared? Like Amelia Earhart in the Bermuda Triangle. Could she and her boyfriend take care of Jacob?

She's lost track of her route. She overcorrects and cuts a corner too tight, knocking over bottles of barbecue sauce. Precious seconds taken to pick them up. What was next? Capers? No. Fish sticks? Yes. She opens the freezer's fogged doors, pretends to take out a box of Fisherman Jake's Super Breaded. Essential, she reminds herself, to factor the grabbing and fumbling of objects into total time.

*

Dr. Mulhouse drove home from work, from a day during which he saw a toddler bitten by

a dog. The parents insisted that he treat the child as if the exclusively indoors dog, a scruffy gray thing with the hiccups, had rabies, which meant that he had to administer an injection in the stomach. The most painful place to receive a needle. The child howled and howled.

On a whim, he drove up the dirt road around the corner from his house. The last scrap of undeveloped land in the entire valley. Even though it was inevitable, outracing the dust the BMW stirred up satisfied him.

For some months, he had actually been trying to get caught. During sex, he had shown Irene new moves, hoping that she would wonder where he learned these things. Not really learned – it was the inevitable physical differences of two different bodies creating different patterns. Irene remarked only that he had been sleeping better. Not snoring, not flailing.

That day, while he'd bounced the child on his knee, wanting more than anything to escape, to treat cleft palates in Nicaragua, he mustered the courage to tell her. *If courage meant desperation*, he thought. How ironic that one could be so generous to strangers and so terrible to the people one loved. Nixon had made his wife put toothpaste on his toothbrush every morning.

He'd keep it simple – I'm having an affair, he'd say.

The garage door didn't open. He hit the brakes, pushed the button harder, and the door began to rise. He would tell Irene he was sorry, but what he meant to say is that he had to muddy the waters.

Mrs. Mulhouse sat at the dining table, crossing items off long supermarket receipts. On the lazy susan stood the two ugly silver candelabras that Mrs. Mulhouse

bought last Christmas, florid angels swirling around the base. She kept her head close to the receipts; she had been complaining of poor eyesight, had asked the ophthalmologist to teach her how to use the machines in the office to analyze herself. Jacob was whimpering, his head turned sideways on the table, as if napping. His little ragmop head.

Your son has cavities, said Mrs. Mulhouse. Three of them.

How could you let him get cavities?

Don't blame me, she said. It's not like I'm letting him eat more junk food. In fact, I'm trying to figure out if I'm buying anything more than usual, but I can't find any discrepancies.

What do you have to say for yourself? he asked Jacob.

I'm brushing my teeth, Jacob said. This infuriated Dr. Mulhouse. Could no one in this family take responsibility for anything? He wrapped his arm around Jacob's waist and lifted him out of the chair.

Jacob started to hit his father's back. Dr. Mulhouse sensed that Jacob could hit him harder.

Sometimes people just get cavities, said Mrs. Mulhouse.

One, sure, but not three all at once. Why are you defending him?

As he carried Jacob to his son's room - Dr. Mulhouse didn't like spanking Jacob on his own bed - Jacob screamed directly into his ear; it was more excruciating than a fire-engine siren revolving inside his brain. Mrs. Mulhouse looked horrified, because he hadn't spanked Jacob in years, but he knew she appreciated him taking charge. He would be dispassionate about the spanking. At that moment, he wanted to hurt his wife more than he wanted to hurt his son. No longer would he say: *No, of course I don't care for*

her. He would tell Irene: *Guess what? Tricia and I made love during your therapy sessions.*

*

Mrs. Mulhouse digs her thumbs into a package of sirloin, leaves a jagged, bitten nailprint in the plastic. *Still, she says, now that that's over, we can tackle only one problem, not a hive of them. Once you complicate things, you can't untangle anything.*

I wouldn't exactly call this a problem, he says.

She picks up a package of hamburger meat. *Why in heaven make a cow look like a burrow of compressed maggots?*

Some girl in the next aisle yells, *Crap!* They hear the rattle of a cart against a shelf. *I thought kids had to be supervised here,* Dr. Mulhouse says.

Only during school hours, says Mrs. Mulhouse.

Flagellate them with Red Ropes, he says, and she gives him a look for making her laugh.

Once the pain subsides, Mrs. Mulhouse puts down the hamburger meat. *Chicken. Or lamb chops with mint jelly.*

Three, he says. *Tonight, for three.*

And then you go wherever you go.

Why? I could sleep on the couch. I could take care of you a little.

You wouldn't sleep on the couch, and I can take care of myself, and I don't want that woman's sloughed cells on me.

That's a dark way to say it.

Are you going to tell me it wasn't a dark thing to do?

How are you feeling?

Not good, she says. Decision made. Lamb chops it is.

*

The first night Dorian took care of Jacob, the night Dr. and Mrs. Mulhouse went to their first *Dine and Debate* group, Dr. Mulhouse was friendly, voluble. Holding up a bottle of wine, he quipped that if they came home drunk, it would be from the Aqua Net in the air. Mrs. Mulhouse said she was going for the finger foods, not the politics.

Jacob told her what time he should go to bed. He was drawn to her immediately. He set the alarm himself, told her the code. He drank cups and cups of Coke. It seemed to her that he kept it in his mouth for as long as possible, swishing the syrupy black sugar. She should ask Mrs. Mulhouse about that.

After he fell asleep, she went into the courtyard. It was a funny space, an open-roofed walkway and a small rock garden full of sharp-veined mica between the two front doors. When she tried to read, the green outdoor lights made her nauseous.

She ashed her cigarette in their dustpan. All in all, despite the fact that Mrs. Mulhouse didn't leave written instructions and Dorian had to ask for their phone number in case of emergency, the Mulhouses seemed pleasant enough.

*

Jacob stands in front of the elephant cart. A mannequin holds strands of identical gold necklaces. In the case are, thankfully, three elephant charms in ascending sizes, daisy-chained together, trunk to tail, set against black velvet.

Shyly, out of breath, Jacob asks the man if he can see one of the elephants.

That's a good choice, says the man. You're young to have such refined tastes.

He holds the elephant in his palm. It's beautiful and smooth and lucky. Luckier than a bright green rabbit's foot on a keychain. His mother will love it, and she'll stop doing that thing where she twirls a pencil in her hair, which makes her seem so old.

Two grown-ups stand next to Jacob. The seller tells them how tusk charms are selling even faster than the Hawaiian puka-shell necklaces the teenagers love.

As Jacob digs in his pocket for money, he hears, at a distance, his mother's voice. Immediately he senses that she is in pain. He sees her far away, past the checkstands, at the end of an aisle. The way she bends over to put something back on the shelf, how she holds her stomach with one arm and hangs onto the shopping cart.

He can't let her see him with the elephant. He has to give it to her at home. Maybe in a secret ceremony in the hot tub. He pulls his hand out of his pocket – a ten-dollar bill and some change – and throws it down on the glass case before running, elephant in hand, towards the exit. The seller will be angry, but it would take too much time to give him all the money.

Jacob runs past a woman with her jug under the filtered water dispenser. There's the sound of a shopping cart being crushed into the back of the other linked shopping carts in their corral. Jacob pushes the button that opens the trunk of Dorian's car, climbs in, lowers the trunk door over him. The elephant feels like a cookie hidden in his hand. Once he lies down, he's not uncomfortable. It's black and hot and it smells like dry dirt that has been set on fire.